

snapshots in lavender

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by [exceed](#)

Summary

The potato war came and went. Techno won, not by fighting, but by watching and farming and cultivating life until sheer numbers overwhelmed his adversary. When everything was said and done, he remained, trying to find a purpose amongst the massive fields of his island. He went back to working the fields underneath an unassuming sky.

Turns out, not leaving the island and waking up one day to find his communicator broken starts an unforeseen chain of consequences; no updates from the subworld to the parent server, and the whole island ends up noted as idle and gets put into the server's storage instead of being counted as a regular inhabited island. While Techno's still in it.

This...causes massive problems.

Notes

rpf fiction is a bit odd for me to write; therefore, this is taken from the thought of them as characters and not necessarily real people. there'll still be no romance, because that's a line i'm not going to touch with a mile-long pole. this is rated mature simply to cover any language that goes a bit beyond teen ratings.

the only additional note to be had at the start is that not all characters are here from the start, and that the additional tags will be updated with more chapters. thank you very much for giving this your eye, and enjoy.

[chapter 1 title from "good grief" by dessa]

2/21/25 note; this work is finished; i am not into mcyt anymore but i hope you like this work that started in late 2020. if youd like to do any derivative works from this i 100% do not care, i am simply a creature of vibes. you do you homies

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

i. time has a funny kind of violence

What was a person without something to hold onto? Were they a husk, drifting? Were they the storms that howled yearly, the ones that thought of nothing but causing chaos upon their path? Were they the silence in devastation?

Were they a person farming potatoes long after their purpose for doing so had passed?

Once, it had been out of necessity to complete a task, to upgrade something that he had long forgotten about over the expanse of time. Then it had morphed into a want, a desire, a *need* to best the person that was at the top, a bone-deep hunger to drag them down from their throne and sit at it with the knowledge that he had *won*, to stomp them underneath his foot until there was no argument of his supremacy.

He had won. He had conquered.

But still, Techno tilled the dirt, planted the potatoes, moved on and harvested them when they were fully grown. Once, this world had been an island in the sky spawned in with the intent of being a waypoint and a home when one wasn't doing things elsewhere, a place to rest when he wasn't adventuring within the world created by the dimension's crafters. It was storage, it was a bed, it was a set of automated systems to run in the background, collecting resources for him.

Now, it was rare for him to see the edge where land met nothingness. The automatons had failed him long ago, had failed his enemy even before he had arrived (though Squid hadn't noticed it for the longest stretch of time), and while the automatons still kept going, lurking at the underbelly of the island, the potatoes they planted and harvested had gone uncollected since the war's end.

There was something fascinating about the island, about it all. Something eternal, something *strange*.

Or- perhaps *strange* wasn't the best term for it. Something closer to *steady* even as it changed- yes, that was better. There was an almost eerie peacefulness to the fields, to the way that, as he endlessly traversed it all, new things kept popping up and creeping in at the edge of his vision. A tree there, a lake that he hadn't remembered before, a forest swallowing up the nexus of the subworld, right where it had all started. Where once there had been the connectors to the outside world laid an overgrown ruin, waypoints crumbled with lack of use.

When he had first come across the ruins four, five months after the war had ended, after his first trip back across the island, there had been a bitter kind of sorrow on his tongue. Not quite *panic*, not when the tranquility draped over his shoulders like a balm, a life spent fighting turned to whatever this was, but-

He had expected this in some way, hadn't he?

On that first long, slow sweep of his world after the war had been won, Techno had taken his time. Hadn't gone with the speed of a man possessed, hadn't been a man utterly consumed by gathering enough potatoes to end famines wherever one could find them. He had walked, had lingered at the edge of the world, and when he found himself looking out at the first glimpse of *nothing* that he had seen in months, he had checked his communicator. Jiggled it around a bit when it only greeted him with a forlorn *click* at the back of his mind, wholly unresponsive to the hand movements and subvocalizations it was designed to detect.

Guess I need a new one, he had thought, and that had been that. Sure, it lingered on in his mind for the rest of his sweep across the land, as he picked his way through fields that looked more and more overgrown, as Techno cleaned them up and replanted the potatoes and went on his way, a job well done- but there had been no hurry.

When the confirmation stared him straight in the face, there was nothing but a soft *oh* in his mind. A moment of slow realization.

This was his home, now, for the foreseeable future.

He took a moment to stand there, to mourn, to think of his brothers- and then he simply started on his second slow sweep, working out and around before coming back in to the center. Followed the exact same path, every meandering little step of it, and doubled back occasionally to find new things creeping out of the dirt, little surprises that colored everyday life.

No hostile mobs appeared, no matter how many weeks turned to months, no matter how many days crept past. By the world's design, they had only been able to be spawned by means of automation, and the only presets he had for those now were for potato automatons. Even though the passive mobs weren't *supposed* to spawn, it was a small pleasure to see something other than him- foxes chasing each other around a small grove of trees, a few of the bigger mobs like sheep and cows finding what food they could find. He watched them pick through the fields, the ones that he roamed to clean and harvest and plant up once again, staring at him with baleful eyes. When he woke up from whatever place he had dropped to sleep, occasionally he would see a rabbit slip into a warren nearby or a bird watching him from a tree.

Perhaps he slept more than he should.

Anything with eyes- the birds, the bees, the sheep- could probably tell that Techno was tired. More than that, he was *weary*. Occasionally, his mind drifted to friends, to family- half-remembered songs in the key of Wilbur's voice, to the fervor in which Tommy would say 'the Blade!', to what his mind had kept of Phil's smile.

He missed his brothers. More than anything, they were what he missed- not banter with Squid or comments about strategy or quiet conversation with Dream, not a remark between friends- he missed his brothers more with every step he took, a quiet kind of longing that only grew with time.

Was this how Phil felt, all by himself in the world of his own creation? When he wasn't immediately paying attention to the fact that he could permanently die, never to see those he

cared for again, did he look out on that ocean Techno was...*pretty* sure their house still stood by and think about how much the silence weighed?

But- Phil still had his communicator. In those heavy moments, he could just call one of them, could call anyone and talk until he wasn't able to speak anymore. Techno, in the same situation, could only stay in silence. His voice ran hoarse with disuse in the rare moments in which he did speak- to the animals, mostly, but occasionally to the fields that he harvested, to the potatoes he picked up, even though it felt awkward- and he tried to remember what the timbre of his voice was meant to be, tried to not feel like it was some other person's scratchy voice coming out of his mouth. (An exercise in futility, as it turned out. *Of course.*)

It was all routine by the end of the second sweep, approaching what Techno estimated was a year swallowed up by the monotony of the grind. First, wake up wherever he had left off the day before, body aching from lack of a bed or even a sleeping bag to lay in. Second, check that his tools were still working, ignore the blunt, unsharpened sword that he still kept on him. Third, fourth, fifth, all the steps up until it started again- stand up, work, eat, work some more, move on if he was done with the area, sleep. Repeat.

Nobody came for him.

Perhaps the admins of Hypixel had closed off his home from the main hub on purpose, he imagined on the nights when the stars shone the least, when even the moon hid itself from view. Perhaps they had imagined that a near-god of fighting who had turned to aggressively farming in spite was something to be afraid of when his stint was finished, when they thought he would come back out to a life 'as usual', to be the Blood God of their sprawling city yet again.

Perhaps Squid had bribed them, sore from losing, or any number of people, the masses, those that had sponsored him back in the day, someone he had beaten had asked for him to be locked away in this form of purgatory, left to slowly lose his mind even under the calming monotony of farming without end, left to die here alone-

Perhaps they had simply forgotten, and the server itself had mislabeled his island as *inactive* before putting it in a little corner of its system. *Perhaps it was just a mistake*, he thought on those nights which he couldn't sleep but the moon shone full above his head, and kept going, kept working, ignoring the whining of his scarred and overworked body.

Did his brothers miss him? Did his friends miss him?

He had friends. Right?

On a particularly bad night, out at one of the far edges of the land, he sat by a stream and let his sword lay in his lap. Memories lapped at the far shore of his mind, those of blood and war and cutting down any who laid in his path, and he considered the worth of sharpening the sword, a stone perfect for the job at hand- but to what effect? To what end would he be sharpening it for? To kill the animals that shared in his bounty?

To get anyone that possibly came in, to get whatever admin checked on him, to tear the dimension down person by person no matter who came in?

Why did he need to fight? Why did he carry a sword? Farmers didn't carry swords.

When he left, the sword did not leave with him. It stayed right there, plunged into the ground by the stream, and he dreamt of the way that metal carved through flesh, of the way he had taught his brothers the techniques of war, the threads of memory hazy and indistinct.

He dreamt of loss.

Night rolled back on into day.

Those potatoes wouldn't tend to themselves.

How long had it been?

In that first month or two, Techno had told the time by his communicator, by that tentative link to the outside world that murmured at the back of his head. If he wanted to know when it was- or if anyone wanted to talk- all he had to do was twitch his fingers or mumble something, and the little object in one of his pockets would just let him feel for the time, pluck that information from where it waited patiently, a step sideways from his thoughts.

Now, he could only properly tell time by the sun, by the number of his fields he had visited, and even that was a terrible way to do it all. The sun could tell vague segments of his waking hours, sure, but a count of days? Impossible. He hadn't bothered keeping track when he had the communicator, and it was a lost cause to do so now with a faulty memory and the occasional day that was slept through.

Days started to blur together. More and more often, he spent stretches of time every week not thinking, not doing anything but letting his body go through the motions. Occasionally, he began to stray from the path- sitting at a river to cast a line out and have nothing to catch for a few hours, a whole day. Time meant nothing. At this point, the potatoes were only to keep himself from losing what he was completely.

If he stayed in one field, he could have enough potatoes to last him a lifetime and then some. If he just ate what was harvested and waited for the plants to regrow, it would be sustainable. With some berries and herbs that had started growing around the vast, vast island to supplement it, if he went to one of the fields that now sat by a new river, maybe if he built a little house instead of roaming...

But what did Techno have, other than this endless cycle?

What did he have if he didn't keep going and make sure that the next field didn't become overgrown and choke out the ground around it?

In the end, it wasn't even a choice.

The house in those daydreams never got built.

A slave to the monotony, a servant of repetition-

It had to have been a year. Or was time skewed? He had done two cycles, was in the middle of a third, right? That must have been a year. It must have been.

Where was everyone? He had brothers, right? Or was that just a faulty piece of his imagination? He hadn't seen anyone but Squid or a Hypixel admin properly since the middle of the war, but- they were there, yeah, in that wider universe beyond the island?

What was a person without something to hold onto? Something *concrete*? As enough time became unreachable in his memory, Techno orbited the point between *nobody* and *somebody* slow enough to spend stretches of time lost to that grueling routine, slow enough to spend hours fishing with the hook at the end of his line empty, mulling over everything best left untouched in a circle that only ended when he was tired enough to sleep. He fished, waiting for that moment, looked at his reflection with the knowledge that the man that stared back was not *him*.

How could it be, with long hair that might have once been pink grown dirty and brown over time, caked with dust and mud and only half-properly washed away with the rain? How could it be, with eyes so similar yet so different, colored with the dullness of time instead of the steadiness of determination?

How could it be, with no sword or bow at hand, ready to lash out if caught off guard?

Where had the idea that he was supposed to be ready to fight come from?

Techno stared at his reflection one day, felt the chill of whatever passed for late fall in this world nip at his skin, let it bite and try to tear and fail to properly hurt him. He stared, long and hard at the face that was not his not his *not his*, and looked back up as he cast his barren line out once again.

He didn't look at his reflection again for weeks. Months.

If he did, he'd try to compare himself to a phantom that he could barely picture nowadays.

The world was changing faster than it had been before, altering itself in ways both unsettling and interesting. Where there was once one tree among a flat plain grew another forest, potatoes forgotten in nature's advance. Streams became rivers that became lakes. Hills became...not mountains, not quite, but rose higher, enough to be a bump in the distance instead of the flatness of what had once been. Weather became more unpredictable, and Techno found himself *fascinated* despite himself at the first whisper of snow he had seen on this island since its creation.

Seasons weren't supposed to be a thing, but in this forgotten land-

It brought a smile to his face for the first time in a long while.

Through the light snows, the potatoes kept growing, and so he followed their growth with a slow lethargy and an additional piece of clothing: a shitty new shawl. To be honest, it was more of a wearable blanket, really, one made over those days where potatoes weren't the main focus, riddled with mistakes made from trial and error that felt as if it should have been muscle memory but stepped off of the path somewhere along the way. It was something he was proud of, in the moments where he could truly appreciate it, but an item that he resented on the other side of that coin for even needing.

The world was changing, and that could only be from a few things: from data corruption, from willful inputs, or from a phenomenon that was probably more of a bug than a feature, unless there were people that studied inactive subworlds. It wasn't something he wanted to dwell on, but...well.

He didn't know much about it, could barely theorize, but it was more than nothing.

Something *new* to dwell on was a relief, compared to the way that his mind seemed to distort time, days cycling like time was being skipped, the way that memories were harder and harder to properly fetch when he was feeling contemplative. Things that were once easy to remember became fleeting to the touch, flighty and skittish when his thoughts strayed near. His dreams were always of fleeting shards placed together haphazardly; a chuckle from someone that he couldn't quite name, the strums of a melody that he could only remember the faintest chords of, in-jokes that lacked the context to properly enjoy them.

There had to be something more going on, here. Surely just time alone didn't cause all of this...unnerving loss of time, of cognitive thought, of his sense of self.

But what could he *do* about it?

Farm potatoes, one part of him said.

Go back to where it all started, the other murmured.

...He didn't have to worry that much about it, right? The nexus of this place was far away, and it wasn't as if there was any pressure to arrive there faster than his usual pace. He could get around to it.

There was always time.

Hey, Phil, you know where Techno's gone? Wilbur and I were gonna, uh, ask for his help with...something. Seen him anywhere recently?

Oh- no? I thought he was with you two? After winning the war, you know, I thought he was planning on visiting, last he messaged me...

You sure you haven't seen the Blade anywhere, huh? Hidin' him from us?

Hah- no, no, nothing like that, Tommy. I was going to message you, you know.

What?

About Techno! I thought he was with you, like I said, right? And he hasn't responded to anything recently. I was getting worried. I am worried.

Well- uh- fuck. Think he's grown addicted to another thing like he was with the potatoes? Some other winstreak on a game?

...No, no, that can't be it.

Phil-

Tommy, go back to where you came from, okay? I'll go find him. Whatever's going on with you and Wilbur, I hope it goes good, okay? Tell him I said hey.

...

I'll make sure to tell you when I find him.

...Fine.

I'll be back before you know it. Stay safe, kid.

Bye, Phil.

At first, he thought the voice was a hallucination.

A far-off call tickled the edge of Techno's hearing as he swept through one of the fields closer to the island's center, the world now trapped in the heart of winter. The potatoes seemed harder, colder- of course, it was winter, but they'd do for food anyways- and as with all of the ones he had harvested since the season had hit with full force, he grimaced and tossed it in with the others. He'd stick with eating those he had harvested *before* then for as long as possible, thank you very much. Even if he was at the start of his fourth sweep...or was it the end of his third sweep of the fields?- He'd probably try and eat all of the potatoes that weren't grown this close to the coldest part of the island first.

He stood up and wiped his brow, sighing and ignoring the puff of frosty air that hissed out of his throat. Ignored the brittle crunch of grass as he stood at the edge of the field, a pile of

potatoes in front of him.

It was then that he heard something- and Techno tensed, looking up towards the trees, a few lengths away, all spruce and pine and evergreen clustered at the edge of the field. A bird, tiny from how far away it was, *cawed* at him.

He huffed, irritated, and went back to his work.

But the voice was familiar- and, worse, it kept popping up throughout the day. Whenever he looked back, feeling eyes on him or hearing something that wasn't *natural* in the woods, something staring at him- but as his shoulders grew ever more tense, ever more ready to bolt, Techno couldn't pin the sounds on anything permanent. It got louder- and then softer, and louder again.

Techno? Techno? Techno?

He nearly yelled back a *what?* at the forest surrounding the field, but only a wheeze left his mouth when he tried to do so. He drank from a flask at his belt, water freezing and biting, but only ended up coughing and hacking out half a lung when he tried again.

Of course it was in *winter* that he fully went insane, ignoring that it was perhaps better to be concerned about there being a winter in the first place.

It was the touch to his shoulder, though, as he considered yet another lackluster potato, that broke him.

He whirled around on a dime, a wheeze of cold, crystallized air leaving his mouth, and met wide, worried blue eyes with startled dark red- but not before he started to throw a punch (*sloppy, sloppy*, the him of a different breed would say, the him that he couldn't recognize as *himself*, couldn't even remotely identify now) and hit the person before him in the shoulder as hard as he could.

Fuck, his hand hurt. Especially his thumb.

He stared, wild-eyed, as the person staggered back, their expression shocked and hurt, and felt a ripple of remorse course through him despite himself- but who *was* this? Who was this person in a world too massive yet too small for just him, and why did they look at him like it was a shock and relief to see him?

Why was there anyone here at all, when there had been nobody there but him for as long as he could remember?

"Techno," they breathed, and he took a step back, eyebrows raising, hands shaking, mouth a flat, confused line towards the stranger. "Where have you *been*?"

It was then that he took the only path that made sense for him: flight.

Techno ran from the stranger in their bucket hat and well-worn, well-loved clothes, choosing to turn and sprint off like a rabbit from his gaze with a bleeding fist rather than face the

consequences of staying, the consequences of not knowing the person that looked so familiar and yet so far from recognition watch him with an unstoppable devastation in their gaze.

The cowardly move, perhaps, but it was the only one he could think of in that situation. That was not a person he knew, not a person he wanted to know, not a person he wanted to have approach again.

He ran as far as he could go before collapsing, ignoring the obvious trail left behind, and tried to ignore the howling void in him that said you left that field half-done, you abandoned your duty, you failed.

Sleep embraced him in silence, the only companion he had ever kept in all this time, and still, the words echoed.

Techno- where have you been?

ii. i'm sitting waiting for my deus ex machina

Chapter Summary

Snow falls. The line is cast. When it's reeled in, it comes up just as empty as always.

(Or: Once upon a time, a stranger tells him, Techno had three brothers.)

Chapter Notes

[chapter title from "suck the blood from my wound" by ezra furman]

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Running away could only do so much. It gave him a day to think, a day to decide what to do and try to figure out why this person was here, how this person he didn't know had his name tucked into their pockets.

He picked himself up from where he collapsed to sleep, brushed off the snow that had fallen in the middle of the night, and didn't go back to the field even as the stream winding its way around his psyche whispered you left it, you left it, you left it. Techno let time freeze around him, a crystalline land almost perfectly silent in the dawn, and left clear footprints as he walked.

Running- or perhaps walking- would only get him so far. It was enough to let him sit down at a riverbank, feet long bare and almost skimming the ice-cold water, enough to let him cast out a line and think.

By the time the stranger caught up to him, he was no closer to figuring out who the hell they were.

Their feet crunched the brittle sticks hidden underneath the snow, snapped the fragile twigs scattered about, heralded their arrival long before they actually stood beside Techno.

There was no use running any longer. If they truly wanted to, it wasn't hard to find him in the middle of this winter. He considered his cast line with hands that trembled from both the cold and a nervous sort of fear.

"Techno," they said, even softer than the first time they plucked his name out of thin air, and his only response was to tense back up and stare resolutely at the rippling water at his feet. As they sat down next to him, cross-legged and feet clad compared to Techno's dangling,

bare toes, the line of Techno's shoulders almost vibrated with tension. "Is everything...is everything alright? You haven't been...answering any of our messages. It took some searching to get me here, you know. Did something happen? You...that punch..."

Rather than answer, he reeled the line in, took a moment to check the hook for any changes- no, no fish, just like normal, normal was good- and cast it out again.

The person sighed.

"Talk to me, please," they said, and then there was a hand on Techno's shoulder- a hand that almost got slapped aside if not for how he couldn't take his hands off of his fishing rod. "I...I know you'd rather sit here, but-"

"You..."

Techno dissolved into coughing, a hand escaping the fishing rod to come to his mouth as he bent over, as his toes skimmed the water and sent a shock through him. Fuck, how his throat hurt, the water he pulled from his flask unable to soothe it, attempted words scraping down the sides of his throat until there was no choice to do anything but stay quiet.

The person next to him- oh, how horrible it was to not know their name, to not have that knowledge tucked under their tongue, hidden like an important secret- fell silent in what seemed to be some sort of shocked- but polite- silence.

They gave him a moment.

That's something I've always liked about them, he thought, before going: *what?*

What was *that*?

"I..." The words came out slow, rough, hoarse. "I don't..." No amount of water would make speaking not hurt, not right now. "...Don't...know who you are."

It seemed enough of a shock for them that they adopted his frozen posture, fingers twitching mid-air as if to grasp for something before they stopped, eyes still locked on him. He looked away and grimaced.

"Techno- *what*?"

"You- know me," he said patiently in return, the scratchiness of his voice leaving long pauses between many of the words. "I don't...remember you. But- but- you're- familiar." And then he was back to coughing, hard and long enough that he had to bend over and wheeze, bad enough that one of their hands found their way to his shoulder and *oh that didn't help at all.* "How could you- how- how could you. Get here? The- that- nexus..."

The nexus that he could infer the purpose of but couldn't remember why it was ever needed, wasn't able to bring that thought to mind no matter how hard he strained for it-

"O-Oh."

Techno stayed silent, as frozen as the snow he had swept away to sit down on hours before. He let them gather their composure- listened to a shaky inhale, something a half-breath away from a sob- and waited for them to continue with an unshakable patience only hours upon hours of being alone could teach.

A patience that only harvesting potatoes with barely a break in the motions would teach.

(*You need to go back there*, a voice in him murmured. *You need to go back there and finish the field up. You need to go back there-*)

Techno sat, and he waited, and he *breathed*.

In. Out.

“That’s why the admins didn’t think that you were here,” they whispered, just loud enough for Techno to pick up. “No connection through transportation, no connection for the server to update the status of this subworld. Shown as inactive, moved to storage with someone inside of it...Techno...”

Reel- *breathe-* in. Check the hook. *Hold it.* Cast- *breathe-* out.

Admins. That word sounded familiar enough that something minor sparked, one minor connection mended itself. The owners and caretakers of worlds.

A hand reached up to touch his shoulder, tentative and hesitant, and Techno’s toes dipped into the water. He left them there.

“Techno-” He was loud enough, again, that he probably thought he hadn’t been heard the first time. “I’m...I’m Phil. Your brother. Your *oldest* brother. You haven’t gotten my messages? *Any* of them?”

He considered the question, divorced from the alien concept that was, apparently, having a brother. Or *multiple* brothers, if ‘*oldest brother*’ was indicative of anything. He took a moment before he pulled out his broken communicator and held it out for them- to *him*, considering that he claimed to be his brother- to take.

From what he could hear next to him, he seemed a bit heartbroken at the sight- an exhale, something sad and angry and tense- but not surprised.

“I think...I’d remember if I had a- a brother,” he said as the person- as Phil examined the broken capsule that had once called itself a communicator. Techno found that his own mouth was turned down sharply, almost enough to hurt as his hands grasped the fishing rod tightly. He nearly opened his mouth to say more- but it hurt, and it was miserable, and he was miserable- so he just took a moment to take his toes out of the water and let it drip off of him.

Talking was too much work.

“Brothers, plural,” Phil corrected gently. Techno didn’t see the point in the correction if he couldn’t remember any of those kinds of details at all, but still. The man could say what he

wanted. He certainly wasn't going to interject. "...Do you remember your potato war? The one with, uh, what's his name...Squid? That was him, yeah?"

A minute passed. He let his eyes go back to the fishing rod as he repeated the motions once again, and he thought that, perhaps, Phil was watching his pointless endeavor too. (It wasn't pointless. It wasn't pointless when it steadied you, when it was a moment of calm to think in instead of a moment of calm to lose himself to apathy in, not pointless at all-)

A potato war. Considering the fields that he toiled in, it sounded about right for him to be a part of something like that.

It was almost far enough to be lost over that blurred horizon, the knowledge of what had happened, the way that his hand had given Squid's one solid shake before a final landmark was decided.

He had hit that mark, hadn't he?

And he had kept going, because it was his life. He farmed the potatoes. That was what he did.

That sounded right.

Techno nodded.

"Okay. Okay." Phil breathed in, slowly, and Techno felt the hand on his shoulder grow lighter until it was a feather-touch. His body grew a fraction more relaxed in response. "...I've heard about this before," Phil said in a tone that felt far more like a front of confidence than true belief. "Sometimes accidents happen, and worlds get counted as idle and get put in storage for a large server and- and if something's still going on in it, it starts morphing just like survival worlds do. This was all made up of potato fields once, right?"

Techno shrugged before nodding again. It made sense, even if it was a bit hard to think of the center of the island being anything but a forest, even if it made the edges of his mind go all fuzzy from thinking about it too much.

"...Then it's changed your memories with it," Phil murmured. "Time's probably wacky, too, since I don't think seasons are supposed to be here...Do you know how long it's been since the war finished?"

Techno was silent for a long, long moment. He shook his head, stayed silent for a beat more, and then gave a small, considering hum. "This is...first winter," he said, carefully picking out his words. "But that doesn't- mean much."

His hands twitched from where they held the fishing rod, almost as if they wanted to do something, to say something. He ignored them.

"Because it could have stayed in that default eternal spring- or summer, or whatever- for many months, right?"

"...Don't know. Been- a year? Two years after war?" His throat hurt. Techno refused to speak any more than that.

That sharp inhale, though, clearly didn't indicate anything good. He didn't have to think too hard to know *that*.

"...Can you come with me, please, Techno? You...getting out of this place'll do you some good, I swear. Do you enjoy farming potatoes end- endlessly, like this?" Phil sounded on the edge of...something. Maybe tears, maybe desperation, but on the edge of *something*.

He didn't answer, but he did reel the line in and lay the rod on his free side, staring at the river in front of them.

Did he like farming potatoes?

Did he like feeling like his head was even a fraction above water? Did he like breathing air? It was an absurd question.

His hands folded up neatly in his lap, his own special effort to stop them from trying to twitch, to stop them from curling up into fists and possibly making the one he had hurt sting further.

Phil's voice broke hard, broke often. "*Please*, Techno- you can have a potato farm where we'll go, okay? You can farm potatoes to your heart's content, you can do whatever you want, I swear. Just- come with me, please," he said, voice so, so close to shattering. Techno's heart tightened without his knowledge of why, why, *why*.

"Techno, *please*. You understand what this place has been doing to you, right? Or have you forgotten that it's bugged?"

No, he hadn't forgotten. He just wasn't going to speak any more.

"I can't lose you again, Techno, and have you die here. I'm not letting you go no matter what."

He didn't want to make this man sad, he realized faintly. He didn't want to turn and see this person that claimed to be his brother have tears in his eyes, didn't want to hear him deflate or cry or strain his voice with the effort to contain his fear about Techno not going with him.

He didn't know this man, and it terrified Techno how badly he wanted nothing more than to follow.

It was with that thought, clear and haunting and looming over him with every passing second, that Techno lurched to his feet, almost startling Phil into falling backwards from his sitting position, picked up his fishing rod, and started to put one foot in front of the other. Started to walk.

What was he doing?

What was his goal?

Phil quickly caught up with him, panic clear as day in his voice. "Techno- *Techno*—"

He stopped to look up at the man. Phil opened his mouth- and Techno looked away as whatever words the man was going to say died before they fully came out. They stood in a shaking silence before Techno huffed, shook his head, and kept walking.

He kept pace.

Clearly Phil didn't know exactly where he was headed, but Techno didn't say another word as they walked, the sun hanging high over their heads as it turned to a downwards arc.

The anxiety running through him kept strong- there was another person there, and no matter what he was told about worlds being bugged, it felt wrong- but he kept going, kept channeling that energy into putting one foot in front of the other, retracing his steps where the snow was clearly barely covering the ground instead of the inch or two the rest of the surrounding snow had.

They arrived at the field that he had abandoned, its appearance haggard and lost, and he stopped at the edge of the field to stare over it.

For a moment, neither of them said anything.

This is a few days away from the center, he thought, one hand coming to rest upon the tree he stopped by. *One field between it and here. One field.*

He looked up to the sky. The sun cast a lower glow over the area, mostly disappeared behind the treeline that made up the horizon. All those hours of walking- of quiet walking- and his so-called brother hadn't complained.

He nodded to himself and made his way over to the harvested pile of potatoes.

A hand grasped his arm. He tensed, looking over his shoulder.

"Please," he whispered to Techno. "You- I- you can't do this."

He huffed softly, ignoring the puff of white air in his face. He didn't realize what he was doing. Sure. That was better than him just...not wanting to eat, he supposed, so instead of jerking away Techno simply turned, gave the hand grasping at his other arm a pat, and started to gently pull Phil along.

That seemed to do the trick, even if he kept talking at him, confused beyond belief. He tuned it out.

When they got there, he finally shook his arm out from the hold it was in and sat down, taking one of the less shitty potatoes from the pile before slinging a very worn-down, torn-up bag off of his shoulder and rooting through it, pulling out a bundle of sticks that he had gathered a day or two ago and piling them up on the ground.

Phil finally grew quiet. He looked up at him, gestured to the ground, and gestured to the pile of sticks. "Food," Techno murmured, the first thing he had said since his throat had grown too angry with him. He pulled out some flint and steel that he had crafted a few months ago

when his former had finally given up the ghost and sparked a flame, sighing when a little bit of warmth was cast back onto him.

The only thing that was left to do was pull out one of the better potatoes that he had on him and put both potatoes onto the flame, poking at them with a stick that threatened to catch itself on fire.

Throughout it, Phil stayed quiet. It was- a bit of a nice change. He looked up to see a crooked smile on the man's face.

Techno eyed him, dubious, and went back to poking at the potatoes on the flame. There was some foil he kept in his bag, but...that would be a bit too much work. The open flame would be fine.

"Eat," he said once they were finished, gingerly taking the potatoes off of the fire and onto the fabric of his bag, pointing at the one that had once been in the pile before he plucked the one that had been in the bag to start eating.

He took a bite of the potato and gave a breathy hum at the way that the hot food warmed him up. They were wonderful, especially in winter.

Silence.

Techno looked up to see Phil watching him with something between amazement and horror. He looked back down.

What an odd person Phil was. Even when he finished his potato and leaned back against part of a broken-down fence to close his eyes, clearly about to sleep, he could hear a reaction- an amused- pained, yes, but amused- little chuckle.

Maybe people in general are just weird, Techno thought mildly, and dozed off to the sound of the other man doing...something. Maybe get a sleeping bag up, or keeping the fire going, or...he didn't know. He thought he could hear a blade, even if that was odd, even though there was no chance of something coming out to attack unless a cow thought Phil was a threat- but it didn't matter. He was exhausted from the sheer effort of social interaction, and nothing would stop him from getting better sleep tonight.

He dreamt of warm, unintelligible conversation and of Phil's worn face smiling at him.

"You really don't remember me, huh."

Techno's hummed, noncommittal, as he let two potatoes bake over a renewed fire, this time wrapped in a thin foil that he reused and just hadn't brought out the night before. He stayed like that until he could feel Phil's eyes leave him, stared at the flames until the fire hissed at him and he had to pay more attention to turning the wrapped potatoes.

"So, um...well, when you were younger..."

He let Phil's words wash over him as he tended to the flames, as he went about his simple morning routine. It seemed to comfort Phil, to talk and talk without end, to chatter at Techno with no real expectation of a response, and there was something that almost made Techno smile about it. It felt like a normal day, even though *so much* about it was leagues away from normal.

Did he process Phil's words? Not at all- but he appreciated them all the same.

As much as it made him want to frown to consider, there was an allure to having someone talk about times before he remembered, an allure to having someone come up and say this is what you did, this is who you were, why I'm here, something that made him want to stay and listen with a singleminded devotion.

But, oh, how he hated it. How he loathed it. How he wanted to shut him up and let out a wordless scream and go back to farming-

So Techno just let it become background noise. Paid it as little attention as he could.

If he listened to everything, he could very well...go insane. Probably.

"And, if you could *believe it*, Tommy shouts about how he feels good killing a woman-"

Techno slowed down at that snippet of information- something that felt so close to reality, so close to a memory- but clenched his hands into fists when the feeling of *nearly remembering, almost there, so close to it* left him. It made him irritable enough to feel like he was brittle all over, a sharp frown on his face, and there was no way the other across the fire didn't miss it, but...it wasn't commented on.

He watched Phil eat his potato in silence, his own devoured by the time that Phil sat down to actually eat- and he looked appreciative, handing Techno a granola bar in exchange. Techno set to work on packing up his things, trying his best to ignore the siren song of the field, and finished what he wanted to do before Phil even finished. To pass the time, he started clearing their little camp- stopping the fire, making sure it was all as he had left it, checked all of the items he kept with him to make sure they hadn't spirited themselves away.

Fishing rod strapped to the bag, potatoes at the bottom? *Check*.

Hoe and other farming tools? *Check*.

Broken communicator in his pocket? *Check*.

He busied himself with leaning against the tree he had slept against and stared in the direction of the island's center, the morning atmosphere washing over them.

Maybe, once, he had been Phil's brother. Maybe in the past, the past that taunted him in the distance, his hair had been ruffled, jokes had been made, *whatever*. Maybe in the past he had been in something of a family. That didn't stop the eerie nature of Phil's presence, the effects it had- the way that Techno stilled when something nudged at the back of his mind, trying to

bring out a memory and not quite reaching where it wanted. There was something to be remembered, and it lurked there but it was too far away to even *think* about properly approaching.

Each little bit, every little word or phrase from Phil that got his mind to double check memories that weren't there made him clench and unclench his fists. The nudges felt like the whispers of memories that tickled at his mind when he looked at his scars- all ones he didn't remember getting, but that his body could remember the *pain* of, could remember the way something had almost torn his side open in one swipe, the way that half of him *ached* before a storm.

What if he didn't *want* to remember?

It was a blessing when Phil's mindless chatter stopped, leaving them in the silence of the island. Techno picked a bit at the dirt under his nails, frowned, and stopped, letting his arms cross as Phil finally, *finally* started to get ready. Blessed silence laid over them as Phil packed up his things, chewed on the last bits of potato, and gave him a smile that was both a pitiful attempt at cheeriness and a clear well of worry.

...It made him feel bad, for that earlier thought. At least he didn't want to *forget* any more than he apparently already had.

Techno stared him down, tilted his head in the vague direction of the nexus, and started to walk. After a half-beat, he heard Phil keep pace right behind him.

Phil kept trying to engage him in conversation over the days it took to walk all the way back to the center, and at this point Techno was ready to call it quits, stay a hermit in a supposedly bugged world, and let everything fade away. Apparently Phil didn't know him as well as he claimed (unless Techno had changed? How much did you have to change for such a thing to be no longer tolerable?) if he kept driving him to the edge of trying to yell at him, but...either way, Techno just wanted to scream.

He didn't, though, out of mercy for his throat and the faint idea that it didn't seem like Phil was fishing for a response every single time. He seemed to not quite be demanding a chat as much as he was seeing how willing Techno was- which was *not at all*.

Relief fell when the latter half of the trip was spent in relative quiet, with Phil only talking once every so often, mostly to ask questions that could just be answered with a nod or a shake of the head.

When the last night fell, so close to the center of the world, it seemed that the blonde had been expecting to make camp, to share a potato or two, to sleep. Techno knew these woods, though, knew them with the way someone who knew something by muscle memory and nothing else did even if it felt like it had lengthened the distance between everything since his

last visit. When Phil seemed ready to stop in the last stretch, Techno kept going, and going, and *going*, and all Phil could do was follow.

There was only a sliver of a moon. There were no stars. Sight, after the sun fell, was nearly impossible: there was a root there, though, and the barest line of a tree there, and when the moon hung high to cast its negligible light upon the tree cover, they came upon the ruins.

He hadn't been to this exact spot since the end of his first go-around, had avoided it even after doing a second, third (he had finished a third, right? Right?) long sweep of his little realm. It was a place that felt haunted enough to almost taste *wrongness*: you could still hear automatons at their work, never decaying even as their bounties piled up, could still see old torches, half-lit, still scattered around as if someone was regularly there. Cobblestone and stone brick laid in disrepair.

They moved forwards, past a point with chests in disrepair, broken items scattered around them, onto a path that shifted under their feet, miserable little pieces of gravel trying to stick between his toes.

The waypoints mattered more than that, though, so he kept on.

Where all the waypoints were, though, where they should have stood in a cluster of broken gateways...

Where all the waypoints laid stood another connector, stretching at least a foot or two taller than what the others must have once been. The substance inside of it, that which connected the subworld to the data of the server, glimmered a soft white instead of a standard purple (*how did he know that? He didn't remember seeing the waypoints very often, didn't remember anything purple couldn't find where that was in his memory couldn't couldn't cou-*), and it left Techno feeling like he had taken one wrong step in a dance that he should have known, one length off the beaten path and nowhere close to finding it again.

Phil, when he finally stopped beside him (not quite worse for wear, not like how Techno had to put his hands on his knees and breathe, body wanting rest, dear, dear sleep), looked... almost jubilant.

"It's still open," he murmured with a glee that Techno was baffled by. The blonde brought out his own communicator, small and sleek, and tapped out a few things on it as images hovered on its surface before he stopped to frown. "...Communication's still shit, though. Techno-Techno?"

He looked up at the man properly, eyes blinking rapidly at the emotions that welled inside of him- he couldn't leave, this was his home, and that portal that bathed them in its light represented leaving, how he wanted to tear it down, oh, how tempting that was- and Phil gave him a small, sad smile.

"You must be really attached to this place," he whispered, and Techno shook as he came closer, getting close, too close, *no no no-*

And wrapped him up in a tight hug.

Solid, warm, steady- it made him relax even after he spasmed, his mind trying to race and figure out *why* it made him go tired and exhausted and melty in Phil's grip. He didn't want to leave, his body didn't want him to, he didn't want to, his mind howling counterpoint to his frantic thoughts, but- *perhaps*-

"Can- I come back here?"

He was quiet, hoarse, voice pained and desperate. It caught Phil off guard by the way that his hold froze, but Techno just stared past him into the forest as the hold grew tight again. "Not for a while," Phil murmured, just as quiet as Techno's plea. "And- I'll go with you if you do, okay, just to make sure nothing ever happens. But they'll keep this little realm up just in case, okay? Just where you left it. Just where it was before, with all the other idle worlds, just...not with a player in it for an unknown amount of time, okay? Okay, Techno?"

Silence. Wind hissed its way through the leaves of nearby trees, a soft background noise that only echoed the way Techno wanted to sway, the way his hands shook. The portal's light kept its unassuming glow over them.

Somehow, he trusted this man. He would trust him with his life and his soul and the very fabric of his being, would pour himself into whatever container was needed just to keep Phil's arms around him, a comfort that he didn't know how to deal with.

Okay. Okay.

Techno didn't answer- not with words- but he nodded as he pulled away, shaking all the harder for the current of trust that ran through his veins, and didn't flinch when Phil took one of his hands in his.

"Let's go home, Techno," he whispered. "Tommy and Wilbur, I talked about them earlier, your brothers, our brothers- have been worried *sick* about you and whatever you've been up to. I know I've already told you, but they've also been away for a bit..."

That was how his departure went: with soft chatter, with a hand clasping Techno's and his trust shining a terrible sun-bright in the light of the gate. It went with a potato farmer leaving everything he knew, putting his faith in someone he still considered a stranger, promises of family and home leading away from a world slowly coming to its knees.

It went with a smile, and Phil's fond laugh, and a flash of light.

Chapter End Notes

i'm not sure if i've figured out whether writing words or editing them is the hardest part of this whole process. anyhow, y'all have a lovely day. tell me if you notice anything, yeah? or just want to ask questions? we're on the path to a rambling little character study right here, folks, and stick along for the ride.

[edit, ~afternoon 11/16:] d...does anyone know any.....chill mcyt/techno based discords to join....i'm practically in shock (tm) from streams today and nobody i know watches mcyt....and twitter is scary. or should i just make a discord and chill with the few people that do join? man i'm ready to scream

iii. my guardian angel's got wings of tinfoil

Chapter Summary

The stage opens upon a bureaucratic nightmare. Techno drifts in the flood of meetings. Phil frets.

(Or: What, he wonders, what kind of a life did you have to live to be referred to as the Blood God?)

Chapter Notes

[chapter title from "god lifts up the lowly" by ezra furman]

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Nothing made sense in this place.

Where Techno's home, his life, his world had been grass and trees and sky and fields, this place was all hard surfaces and sharp lines and bright swaths of color that strained his eyes. His toes couldn't curl into the dirt, couldn't feel grass, couldn't gain a proper foothold here. If he focused, he could almost imagine himself wearing shoes much like Phil's boots- but why would be have them, back in his home? Why have them when you didn't need them?

He kept trying to curl his toes, but couldn't find purchase. Phil ferried him from place to place, from places with marble floors to places with surprisingly soft carpet, and he avoided the gazes of the people that watched him like hawks. They all had eyes of diamonds, hands shaped by power, voices that spoke in rhythmic staccato that were all alien enough to make him bristle up instinctively in defense.

They weren't like Phil. They'd never be like him. They looked at him and Techno could tell by the tilt of their heads that they found him lacking.

He was drowning in the thick atmosphere, and he could only try to scramble for dry land, could only attempt to guess at who these people were, who these people were that talked to Phil about *bugs* and *compensation* and murmured *oh, how the Blood God has fallen.*

"We're headed home," Phil kept telling him, whispered when someone stuck something in him, Techno's eyes zeroing in on the point that they drew blood from, whispered when they were ushered out to go walk somewhere else under bright lights and clean hallways and floating transportation hubs to other places where bureaucracy reigned.

(The logo that was scattered around the place was similar. Why was it so similar? Why did all of these people, when told who he was, knew him and gave a start? Why?)

“We’re headed home,” Phil kept saying, sitting in a waiting room for the next person in a crisp suit to look at them both, look at their papers, and judge them further. There was no *home* in sight. There were only jagged pieces of frustration and words that went over his head and more hellishly hard floors for his feet in sight.

“We’re headed home,” Phil kept saying, and eventually Techno snapped- tore himself away from Phil’s gentle hold, snarled and crackled and paced away and barely kept himself from throwing another terrible punch, an action that felt reasonable but not to Phil, not to the bruise that had blossomed on his face days ago and hadn’t entirely left.

The frustration, the fear of being in such a foreign (oh, but how some of this spoke to him in an alien way) place- it flooded him so viscerally that it felt like its own kind of punch, so much so that it left him reeling and adrift in a sea of confusion.

(Why was everything trying to scratch at a blank spot from his mind? Why couldn’t he be somewhere that also left his mind quiet, that also let him breathe, something that felt like his potato fields?

Was it just because he hadn’t slept?)

Phil’s hold on him, after his...*outburst* was more secure. Not tighter, not when Techno’s chill was razor-thin, but more secure.

It could have just been that incident which caused Phil to blaze through bureaucracy at a faster pace after that, but it was probably some mixture of things that Techno had no hope of identifying. He stared down people, talked in a clipped tone of voice that said *we’re going soon, whether you like it or not, so fix what I’m telling you to fix or people will hear about this, about what happened to Techno.*

That last bit seemed to cow them all. He wondered why.

“Finally,” Phil sighed after the last meeting, looking as exhausted as Techno felt, rubbing at his eyes while Techno just squinted his against the too-bright lights of the place. “Our next destination...home.”

He didn’t snap at him. Techno just echoed Phil’s sigh and tried to ignore the way that people eyed them with even more suspicion as they walked past, as if having dirty hair, dirty clothes, and no shoes was a bad thing- ...wait.

(Why did all these people like shoes to begin with, anyways?)

“Home should help you remember things a bit better,” Phil explained, his voice quiet and gentle, compared to the quiet and harsh voice he had used with all of the people he had talked to before. How long had it been? Had it been hours? “You and Wil, your other older brother, you two helped me build it when I finally got a license to create a private server, and it’s a lot

different from when you were a kid, or wherever you were before I found you but it's home and, uh-”

Techno looked at him. Raised an eyebrow. Phil glanced over and started to snicker as they arrived at their destination, almost as if it were unintended.

He didn't get it. He kept staring, even as Phil broke out into proper laughter that sounded rather more delirious than Techno thought laughter was meant to be.

“Yeah, yeah,” Phil chuckled, pulling him away slightly as they finally got into a little booth at a transportation hub. Some people seemed to be using terminals that would teleport them to somewhere else within the server, but the one Phil was squinting at was bigger, bulkier, clearly meant for something of a longer distance. After he let Techno go, though, his hands seemed to fly across it as if on wings, leagues faster than the people squinting at smaller terminals.

“You were always back and forth between this world- Hypixel- and home,” Phil murmured, and it was almost as if he was speaking to himself, the quiet tone- but Techno’s slightly longer ears twitched, picked it up easily. “Even before I got the license, you were pretty big here...but that’s a conversation for a later time, I bet...” He hummed, paused to squint at the screen that kept changing before Techno’s eyes, and kept on manipulating the screen.

“But...” His voice grew a bit louder, something closer to whatever passed for normal in Phil’s eyes. “I’m glad you’ll be with me for a while, you know? I mean, even if you don’t know a whole lot of the past, I’m just happy to have company besides the animals, since you were pretty permanently gone for the past year from both the potato war and whatever happened afterwards...”

Techno blinked when he found himself nearly falling asleep, jerking back awake with a silent yawn and a shake to his own shoulders.

Gods, he was exhausted. First, there was the no sleep, and then there had been hours of walking and walking both in his world and in this hell of meetings and discussions that went over his head-

“I’ll stop now, I think,” Phil said with a chuckle. Techno blearily looked up to see Phil smiling back at him. “I’m tired too, hah, but coordinates are all set, everything’s synced...let me hold your hand for a second, and we’re off-”

The light of teleportation was the same clear white that the portal to the world they were leaving had. Was it because of Phil, he wondered, or something related to this world- all of the light, a shower of petals of light, trust and hope and safety-

And then they were gone, their traces in Hypixel just the smudges of dirt that Techno left behind.

How about that.

At a familiar-looking ocean's edge, the world stained in the colors of sunset, Techno stared down, down, down, until all he could see was a stranger's face staring back, all dull eyes and long, matted hair that was brown with dirt and the trek of time. His toes finally curled into the ground, into the sand at the edge of the water, similar yet so different from the place he thought had to have been his home. He breathed in, slow and deep and tired, to find that the air bit sharply at his lungs before settling in like a content housecat.

Phil stood next to him, unspeaking, unmoving. He let Techno take his time. It was something he appreciated, his patience- it let him breathe even though he was better off laying down to sleep, it let him sift through the thoughts that plagued him, the knowledge that his overactive mind would cycle back around to an even deeper apathy, an even deeper thoughtlessness given enough time.

In this world's climate, his terrible, wonderful, no-good shawl was too hot for what was otherwise a moderate temperature a hair too high to be considered cool. The wool itched incessantly at his skin, and he took it off slowly, bundling it up in his arms with a careful precision that spoke of possessiveness. It was *his*. *He* had made it. It was... It was...

"How about we go inside?"

Techno made no argument. Not when Phil led him into his abode, something roomy yet humble, built with little spaces clearly favored by different individuals- a place that felt like it should register to him but didn't. Some rooms seemed rarely used, as they passed them by in a little hallway- Phil didn't stop at any of those, but steered Techno into a bathroom, the guiding hand reaching up to brush against his hair (still in some kind of a ponytail, even if the band was ratty, even if half of the hair wasn't in it now) with a gentleness that surprised him.

"...Techno?"

He hummed, not bothering to give a proper response. Just...an acknowledgment. Anything else, at this stage of awareness, was too much effort to give.

"...Yeah, you're exhausted. Let me just wash out your hair before you sleep, okay? And I can braid it up for you, if you want? Sit down right there, just like that, lean back, give me just a bit..."

It ended up being more than *a bit*, but Techno didn't mind, not when that unstoppably trust swelled and melted over his skin to stay. It was a perfectly fine opportunity to be just *this* side of dozing, drifting along as careful fingers picked at the tangles in his hair, as water was poured over it (carefully missing his face, his body), as clumped dirt was slowly broken apart and washed away.

Techno closed his eyes and let the sensations linger.

In the depths of his mind, he wondered if this had ever happened before. If Techno had been half-asleep, roughed up from work, or farming, or whatever past-false-him had done, and

Phil had washed out his hair then so it wasn't terrible come the next day. It would certainly explain the ease with which Phil got through it all, raking and picking most of the worst parts out and then going in with warmer water, with shampoo and conditioner that smelled herbal-something that he felt like he could almost name, so close yet so far from murmuring its name.

The whole experience- the actions, the sounds, the smells- were *nostalgic*. Techno...wasn't sure if he liked that.

It was too short a stretch of time to truly fall asleep, but he was still disgruntled when Phil shook his shoulder lightly, still squinted up at Phil's face when he got out of his half-asleep funk. There was a warm, dry towel around his hair, keeping it from soaking his still-dirty clothes, and it was those that Phil seemed to focus on and frown at after half a second.

"...I still have some stuff in your size in the house," he eventually said, standing up and helping Techno up with the ease of someone that had done this to his littler siblings far too often. "In your room. Just...I'm not sure if I have an extra of your cloak, not when you took all of them to Hypixel, but you might not remember that either..."

Phil hummed indecisively before looking Techno in the eye. He stared back with the gaze of a person that had absolutely no idea what the *fuck* the other was talking about.

"...That's a no, then. Let's just get you some clean clothes and to sleep, and we can...talk in the morning. That sounds good."

He grunted. No, he didn't want to talk, not when Phil had tried that before, not when it was only bearable when he talked about things that sparked nothing in him-

"And we *are* talking, Techno," Phil said, almost as if he were reading his mind while helping him up from where he had been sitting against the outer edge of a bathtub. "I know you're not a big talker, never were, but you've worried us all beyond belief, Techno. While I'm not letting the others know or come in for a bit...even though they probably won't be happy when they find out, I need to know how you're doing before they barge in. I need to know when you'll be ready for visitors, what you want, what you need in general. Okay?"

Another grunt. Did it even matter?

"...Please answer me, Techno."

"...'Ys," he muttered, shrinking and letting a hand drift up to touch the warmed blanket wrapping up his hair. It got quickly patted down back to his side again, a small hum from the blonde warning him against trying that again.

At least that seemed an acceptable response.

Phil guided him, both of their movements lethargic and clumsy, to a space that didn't feel like *his*, given that...his home was just the forest, the fields, the island. His home, the home in his heart, was the wind on his face, snow falling in winter, instead of a pleasurable warm

room decorated with...with swords, and bows, and...other things, bits and bobs that spoke of a life. A history.

It was enough to make him stare, wide-eyed and mouth open, but not enough for him to demand an explanation while his body complained of a lack of sleep. It was easier to sigh, shake his head, and nod at Phil when he left and closed the door to give him some privacy, waiting clearly right outside, a clear *change and then a quick chat*.

The clothes were so different than the ones he had been wearing. They were soft, they had no holes, no scrappy edges, but despite all of the differences, they felt...comforting. To Techno, it was almost as if he was someone else in the minute it took to pick out clothes without thought- a look in a small mirror in the room and he didn't know who stared back at him.

(Who was the impostor? The pink-haired man with clean clothes or the dirt-stained farmer with a ragged shawl over everything? Which was the face he wanted to see the least?)

He opened the door to Phil. He didn't want to think about it, not now.

"If you wake up in the middle of the night," he said patiently to Techno, face not showing whether he was shocked by the differences between the Techno of thirty minutes ago and now, "either find me or just stay in the house, okay? Since you were last here, I did a bit of landscaping and I may have missed a bit of safeguarding against mobs. No going out to fight them. Make yourself a cup of hot chocolate."

...What was he talking about? None of that made sense. Why would he need safeguarding against cows and sheep? Foxes, maybe, but they were just...playful, if rather nippy. He frowned, pensive- *perhaps he just wants me to stay no matter what, thinks I don't know what worlds have in them*- but eventually he just nodded and kept a stone face through the rambling instructions. He'd figure things out as he encountered them. Right now he just needed to...to...

Phil laughed when Techno yawned, long and slow, and ushered him back into the room with squinting eyes. "I'll see you tomorrow, I'll see you in the morning, okay? I know the sun's just setting now here, the time's set a bit different than on Hypixel, but just...sleep. You..."

Phil yawned. He yawned and then blinked, clearly startled at himself before his eyes focused back on Techno. "You did that," he accused, and Techno took a step back, giving a slow blink of his own (*What? Was there hostility in his voice- that wasn't hostility, right?*) before the moment seemed to settle. "Hah- heh- anyways. You...we both clearly need it. Sleep tight, Techno."

And then the door was closed.

Techno was alone, in a room that was and wasn't his, and he turned to stare down the bed in the corner.

Perhaps it was to be expected that he ended up in a tight ball on the floor, a blanket dragged down from the well-made bed to be wrapped around him, a cocoon to hide away from the

world. Perfectly comfortable, perfectly nice. A hell of a lot better to be on a flatter surface and not be annoyed by lumpy, too-soft surfaces, anyways.

Some sleep sounded so, *so* very nice.

(Too bad he didn't end up getting very much of it at all.)

Techno didn't know how long it had been, but what he *did* know was the feeling of restlessness, the desire to get out and get *moving* on some meaningless task. His eyes, though, open and staring into the low light of the bedroom, flickered to the hallway beyond the door. He could hear Phil faintly snoring in a room somewhere closer to the main room; that made things tricky, he mused, sitting up gingerly and tiptoeing to open the door.

What to do, what to do. He couldn't find sleep again, not so soon, and he had been forbidden to go outside. He also didn't particularly want to wake the man up.

Interaction was far too hard to be preferable- so instead, Techno went to go drift around the house, taking in the fragments of a life too far away to remember as he idly roamed. A hand brushed up against a photo near the foyer, four people in it in various states of cheer- one Phil, one the face that looked Techno in the mirror, and two of unknowns. Short, blonde, an angry face. Tall, brown hair. Beanie.

When he looked at them, time seemed to expand and retract, snapping back like a rubber band- and then it was half an hour later, and there was a scowl on his face with nothing to show for it. He withdrew, shot the picture frame an accusatory look, and stuffed his hands in the pockets of the unfairly comfortable clothes he had fished out of the wardrobe, burrowed further into the clothes that smelled distinctly floral, just like whatever Phil had used on his hair.

None of it mattered. There was more to investigate.

Of course, exploring didn't end up getting him much of anywhere. In the kitchen laid a few messy scribbles taped or stuck to the fridge with magnets that he couldn't puzzle out. More frames could be found scattered around the messy counter, more bits and pieces of Phil's daily life laid out for all to see: a handmade mug with 'POG' written on the side, lopsided but well-loved. A stack of envelopes that had been opened and had the letters inside put gingerly back where they belonged, stacked neatly on one counter compared to the controlled chaos that surrounded it.

His investigations lead him to the cabinets, to the pantry, to the dark living room. He stared at the couch, at the nearby chair, a bean bag, multiple blankets, all surrounding a well-used coffee table- and he spun around to go back to the kitchen.

Too much, too much, too much. Better to stick to simple cabinets and shitty mugs and drawings he didn't have to look at instead of being tempted to drink in the sights of things that had seen use by more people than Phil. He ignored the way that his hands reached for things that he didn't totally understand in his idle movements, Techno only half-aware of his actions as he peered inside the pantry, got out a bit of a pre-made hot chocolate mix, and shuffled right over to the fridge soon after to get a container of milk.

There were pans there, pots here, cabinets that he knew he didn't need anything from. His hands shook as he went for a large mug from one shelf, something plain and simple that didn't ring any bells in his mind, and went over to the microwave to stare at it for a long, hard second. Looked at the mug, having poured the milk in it just a second ago.

How long was it for? Was there such a thing as heating liquid up too much?

By the time he had looked back up, his hand had already pressed the button to open the door to the little machine. He pushed the mug inside, closed it, and squinted at the hot cocoa powder container.

...He didn't know what to do.

It made him sigh, rub at his eyes, and groan. It was what made him press numbers (random? Not? How could he tell?) on it and then the *start* button, and he leaned over the counter to take deep breaths as it *vrrrred*.

This wasn't his home. This *couldn't* be his home. This was the home of someone who only claimed to be his brother, and no matter how plausible it seemed...he didn't want to connect those puzzle pieces. Perhaps it had been the residency, once, of someone who had shared his face. Half of the things in the house made him freeze up when he stared at them, made his mind bluescreen (and what was that term meant for, again?) for minutes on end, and that simple part of reality made his hands clench, made the firm line of his mouth tremble.

He just wanted to farm potatoes. He wanted to get away from Phil and his kind smiles, get away before the others that claimed to be his brothers came, but...even with his reluctance to learn more about himself, there was an undeniable allure to it. He had to breathe in the sweet and bitter taste of remembrance, had to go back for that second taste of comfort, just like how he had melted when his hair had been washed.

It was undeniable, no matter how much he told himself that none of it was plausible, that these people knew him. That, at the very least, Phil did- but Techno would deny that internally until he remembered it all in return, would deny it to his dying breath if he could. What kind of a person would he be if all the facts he had lived day to day by on the island had been false?

What kind of a person would he be if he remembered and was once again a stranger to himself twice, thrice over?

He was just a potato farmer. It was his soul, what he breathed, what he ate- potatoes for breakfast, lunch, dinner. Something he could eat whenever he was hungry.

The idea of hot chocolate drawn out of some hidden sliver of himself, though, was too good to ignore.

The various smells of the kitchen didn't fail to bring him back to the present in his spaced out mindset, the chocolate scent of the powder container taking him back to reality, the vrrrr of the microwave in the air a background hum, the various spices and foods that Phil kept in the kitchen filtering into his sensitive nose and not letting him leave to his thoughts again.

It was all too much and not enough. He was used to the hyper-clear smells of the forest and fields, not the muddled and mixed scents of this kitchen keeping him alert simply through the confusion of trying- and failing- to identify the scents. It made him tense and relax in turns, and if the microwave didn't go off when it did, Techno would have probably gone into a spiral about that until Phil found him in a puddle on the floor.

As it was, Phil found him as he was in the middle of delicately tapping chocolate powder into the hot milk, trying to find out when it would just...be perfect. How much was too much? Had the fake him of a previous life liked it with more milk or more powder? Had the previous Techno even liked it? His nose wrinkled at the thought before he jumped at the sudden hand on his shoulder, nearly dumping all of the powder into it at once and barely saving it.

"...Hey." Phil seemed exhausted, torn from seam to seam as he gently took the container from him and tapped a smidge more into the mug. "...That should be enough from what I remember, Techno."

He had been about to put in thrice that amount. He squinted, clearly suspecting Phil of something, but drifted about in search of something to properly mix it with....

And was promptly handed a spoon.

Techno frowned at Phil, who had already moved away to go do something else, and turned back to mix his chocolate with the sullenness of someone that very much didn't want everything done for them, especially someone that he was still on uneven footing with. He was sure that his posture looked closed off, defensive, hostile (can't show the trust, can never show it, not now)- but Phil merely smiled at him and kept bustling around, blinking sleep from his eyes.

Once the mixture was combined, Techno took a hesitant sip.

It was...good. Nice. It was an interesting flavor, one that was and wasn't a surprise, and he closed his eyes to sigh after he took a long sip. It scalded, but if it was 'hot' chocolate, it should do that, right?

He opened his eyes to see Phil staring. He stared back, eyes dark and dull and awash with the lack of sleep he had gotten. Phil looked away.

Techno made his way out of the kitchen (cozy, but not too small, enough to accommodate the two of them and probably one or two more without discomfort) and avoided the living room,

drifting around the house and not focusing on one thing, taking sip after sip of the drink, his tongue complaining until it cooled down.

The drink was a flavor that didn't *feel* like it should be comforting, but it was, and it set him even further off course than before. His mixed feelings made him go a bit slower, even if he didn't let himself linger wherever he slowed to a stop. Lingering was bad, it...it...

Whatever. Point was, it wasn't smart to go looking at every single thing. But...if he kept walking around, he would do that.

The solution?

...Where could he go? Back to the more open common areas? Outside? To a specific room? There was a second floor, he thought, although it seemed like it was just for storage, that tiny upper layer to the place that it seemed from the outside, and perhaps there was a basement, but he hadn't seen any stairs that lead to one, either. That limited his options if he didn't want to search overly hard for a place that felt safe, that felt unassuming, something that didn't try and remind him of things better left untouched.

The choice was easier than it should have been, in the end. He slunk into the bathroom and curled up on one of its mats, letting his knees draw up to his chest while he slowly sipped at the mug.

His toes curled in and out, feeling the soft-ish texture of the mat. There was less pressure on his mind, here- he hadn't turned the light on, didn't have any decent amount of moonlight coming in through the room's tiny window, and thus couldn't see anything like pictures or keepsakes that could be clustered around the sink's window.

It was good. Safe. Secure.

"Techno? *Techno?*"

He stayed silent when Phil called. He looked into his mug of hot cocoa and saw nothing from the darkness. He took a long sip of the liquid, now just warm instead of hot, and let his knees press tighter to his chest.

"Techno! Please don't let me look outside, it isn't safe, oh, gods, if you're gone again, Techno, I- ...oh."

Techno's eyes slowly swept to the entrance of the small room. Phil stood in the doorway, clutching the mug he had noted before as well as a bag of....something. A blanket was flung haphazardly over his shoulder, cast in the warm light that the lit up hallway cast upon him.

He said nothing. Phil took in a deep breath and sighed it out, the sound shaky and on the verge of panic. *True* panic.

"Don't worry me like that," he whispered, slowly coming to sit next to him and get them both situated- the mug and bag set aside on the floor, getting the blanket shaken out and pulled

around Techno's shoulders, around his own shoulders. "I can't lose you again, Techno. I'd be the worst oldest brother if that happened."

Techno shrugged and turned back to his mug, draining the rest of it before setting the mug down and wrapping his arms around his legs, all pulled up to his chest as they were.

"Techno, I..."

"*Shhhh*," he said- or rather hissed- back, eyes slowly closing as the warmth of Phil and the mug finally processed. "*Shhhhhhhh. Shh.*" So much easier than speaking. So much kinder to his throat.

"You can't keep doing this forever, Techno. I know your tricks."

"No you don't," he finally mumbled after a long, long moment, finally resigned to the fact that he'd have to talk to communicate finer points. "Don't know me. Not 'rlly. Everything makes my head hurt. Not my r'm. Not my home. Don't know you."

It was obvious that he had hurt Phil with those words, considering that reaction of widened eyes and a frozen form, but before Phil could ramble more, try to remind Techno of days long gone and forgotten that he hadn't been a part of, he hummed and felt himself fall right on back into that apathy, fall into that special place in his mind where nothing mattered. It was easier to fall asleep that way, rather than have his mind race- and it was the most comfortable place yet, especially with Phil tugging him to lean on his side.

(He'd have to take that up with Phil later, have to pick a bone with his ramblings- or maybe not. It'd probably be easier to just get whatever potato farm he was promised and then let the apathy swallow him up and refuse to leave.)

If he had focused just before falling asleep, just before disregarding everything that wasn't basic warmth and darkness, focused enough to know more of the world around him, he would have heard a fond sigh that was saturated with deep worry. Would have felt being moved onto a bed that felt like everything soft and wrong and not-quite-right, but had once been nothing more than a pad to collapse upon. Would have heard the murmured "Goodnight, Techno," and let floral-sweet memories bubble up in Phil's wake.

But instead, Techno kept drifting. It was what he was good at, anyways. At least sleep's gentle touch came far faster, far easier than before.

Chapter End Notes

this is...a cry for help, once again, and not one edited in after the chapter's been out
bahaha

if anyone knows any good discord servers for techno / sleepy boys / etc that's pretty chill, pretty into character introspection...hit me up. i might end up making one but i

doubt itd get many people at all! but tell me if that's what you'd prefer, huh? i'd like to talk to people both about this and about more general things. i can't really handle twitter. (who watched any of the streams on the 16th? jesus christ.)

[EDIT: discord server has been made, both for fic purposes and as a general sbi chat. can be found in both ch4 end notes AND general end notes.]

anyhow. as you can see, we're well and truly into the vibing part of this story...

iv. i want the secrets your secrets haven't found

Chapter Summary

Potatoes are planted. Nights grow ever deeper. Adjusting to such a new life isn't that easy.

(Or: In most cases, living somewhere means you're expected to help out with the common struggles of life. Phil's little server is no exception.)

Chapter Notes

[chapter title from "human" by dodie]

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The lack of a routine in Phil's world was unsettling. Unnatural. It made Techno's hands clench and unclench constantly, anxiety bubbling through his veins at the fact that the routine he had gone with for months and months, over a year, all of the time he remembered living just wasn't feasible here.

There must have been a *look* in his eyes when he had been thinking about it the first full day there, for after eating breakfast (not potatoes, which left Techno disinterestedly picking at whatever boring, flavorful food Phil had cooked up), Phil took him outside.

Phil had told him to *get ready*, first, whatever *that* entailed, and so Techno had been left in his room not ten minutes earlier with a deep sense of confusion, staring at the room around him. In the end, he only grabbed a few things that weren't from the wardrobe, dried lavender sitting at its bottom- his threadbare pack that had carried his essentials in his own world, including his farming tools, and what looked like a walking stick leaning against a wall, bare and simple. Sturdy. Respectable.

In the proper light of day, Techno could faintly appreciate the land around Phil's home. It was flat towards the ocean's edge, but as he looked behind the house it turned into rolling hills, into thick forest, into mountains on the horizon. He tugged at the sleeves of his shirt, sighed, and looked up at Phil, who had...light armor on? And a *sword* strapped to his belt?

It was the look of shock on his face, though, that made Techno blink even more- and then he opened his mouth, and an even more confusing set of words than *I'm your brother, Techno, and this world is bugged* poured out of his mouth.

“...Why aren’t you wearing your armor, Techno? Where’s your axe?”

It stunned Techno enough, in fact, that his mouth moved without him thinking.

“Why would I-” and *there* was the coughing, that familiar friend, and how he longed for the times when nobody was there to demand conversation with him- “Why...Why would I need any of it? Nothing’s- going to attack, right? I mean maybe- maybe an angry cow-”

Oh. And *there* was the devastated look that Techno had half been expecting to pop up again, the kind that said *you poor soul, you know so little, it hurts me to see you not as the person I expect you to be*. It made him bristle, mouth curling into a small frown, but Phil just looked... sad. Quiet.

He didn’t like it.

“That world- it- it-” Phil broke off to wipe at something on his face. Techno, losing interest just as fast as he had gained it, started to look away. “That world *changed* you,” he whispered, “it really did, it changed... gods, it changed such a big part of you.”

Thank you very much for making me feel better about this whole situation, brother-that-may-as-well-not-be-my-brother.

“I just want a farm,” he murmured in half-response, already walking away towards the hills. He didn’t want to talk about that, about lives that weren’t worth the cost of remembering, the cost that he could practically see Phil weighing in his mind. Instead of dwelling on that, of letting the passiveness that clung to him spin into overthinking things, he let his mind drift to where he could set up a farm.

“Techno...”

Would potatoes fare well in the hills he stared down? Would the hills be a detriment to the construction of a farm in the end, or would it not matter?

He let his toes curl in a patch of ground that was more dirt than grass. *Hm.*

If the regular soil wasn’t the best for crops, he could always grow them underground, right? There was something that tickled the back of his mind about underground farms, something that perhaps he had done in his original world and abandoned. It was an interesting thought for later, but it didn’t matter at the moment. What mattered was scoping out the perfect place for a farm.

“Techno? You know I wasn’t...saying that you’re a different person, right? I’d be- happy to help you with a farm.”

All that man could spew out were words upon useless, useless words. There was no point in even attempting to tune back in. He crouched down to poke the ground that he stopped at, rubbing blades of grass between his fingers, digging them into the ground so he could get a better sense of the soil.

There had never been an ocean on his island. This would be a trial-and-error kind of farm no matter where around here he placed it.

“You’ll get the farm, Techno! Just—”

His hand closed on his shoulder yet fucking *again*, and Techno blinked. Stopped. Slowly pried the hand off of him. Kept going.

He didn’t feel in his body, not quite. He breathed in fresh coastal air and breathed out awareness- and the next thing he knew, his body howled *get off of me get off of me get off of me* and he was torn back to where he once was, the world murky to his senses as his body whirled around on instinct. His body was operating on pure panic, on the sudden doublespeed beat of his heart, on the one blazing point where he could tell someone was touching him, what the hell was going on-

The hell, apparently, turned out to be him blinking at the hand on him before he pushed Phil harshly away, snarling with the force of someone only half-aware of their actions, grasping at Phil’s sword that was strapped to him on pure instinct and taking it away smoothly under the man’s shock. It only took a twirl, a spin, a lunge-

And Techno stared directly at Phil’s eyes, the man’s mouth in a grim line his hand bled, clutching at the blade that had been moving like lightning to pierce him in the chest.

Techno froze-

-and suddenly everything was too much to handle, his heart pounding in his ears, doublespeed in doubletime with adrenaline, and the knowledge that something was very, *very* wrong pressed down on him with the weight of cold, hard stone.

He couldn’t breathe.

How did he know how to do that? Why had he done it to *Phil*? *Why had he nearly killed the man?*

He gasped with the force of the confusion, staggering back from Phil and looking down at his hands once they had dropped the sword. They were worn, calloused (from handling a hoe, from farming, from long nights holding a fishing rod for nothing to ever, ever bite, not from fighting, never from fighting-), shaking- and for a second, he could imagine blood coating them, dark and wet and collecting under his nails- before he looked back up at Phil.

He looked...conflicted. Something in Phil seemed happy, jubilant- and who seemed jubilant at nearly getting killed?- but there was a seriousness to him that he hadn’t seen before, not even when he was staring him down at horror from the server’s conditions. He had already sheathed back the sword, as if that solved everything, but Techno could see him wipe his hand on his side, grimacing at how it clearly stung, at how even gloves couldn’t protect him fully from gripping the blade.

Apologies had to be made. The regret was there, the remorse, the all-encompassing panic that threatened to flood him was so clearly present- but he bit an *I’m sorry* back, locking those

two words behind his lips just as Phil's eyes went back up to meet his.

Techno shut his mouth tight, tried to lock that impulse to let that remorse out, the impulse that had sprung out into the void of his mind going back behind bars, and forced his hands to stay clenched at his sides.

He couldn't allow himself to feel sorry. Couldn't let it spring back up. *Boundaries were there to be kept.*

They were at a stalemate. Phil looked as if there were a million words to say. Techno entertained the thought: *Why did you do that? Why'd you hurt me? Aren't you my brother? What kind of a person are you?*

I'm thinking the same thing, he would say in a world where those words weren't under his own lock and key, unreachable and unknowable. *I'm as much of a stranger to me as I am to you.*

"Techno—" Phil looked as if he was about to say something, about to lecture and say all the things that he had thought he would say- but seconds later, he sighed. Deflated. "... Nevermind." Finally, pity for him.

But...it didn't quite look like pity, the flash of Phil's gaze as he gestured for Techno to follow him, unreadable in his motions and a puzzle clear on his face. Subdued, he did so, hunched over to try and look...less like whatever he had looked like before.

How did Phil see him?

Had he looked like a monster in that split second of wild movement, of untamed energy? Had he looked like something horrible, something terrible, something that made Phil's gaze hard and angry and-

And why did he even worry about it? Why did he care what Phil thought?

Truly, Techno didn't know what kind of person was trapped under his skin, waiting patiently to claw its way out. He didn't know anything other than the life he had been living. Even as the apathy drew its lovely veil across his personal sky, he couldn't help but think and think and think about the situation, and wasn't that novel? Wasn't it amazing, to not be kept such a prisoner by that lethargy?

But, still, he was undeniably jailed. Techno was still under the surface, unable to come up for air. He drowned as Phil, stiff in posture and gait, took him to an empty stretch of land, his attention constantly going to the nearby forest (*dark, dangerous*, something deep in Techno murmured, while the other pieces of him yelled *safe, bright, open, go explore, some bushes hold berries*) as Techno stared down the land.

He let himself just...walk. Walked in circles, thought of the soil, tried his hardest to ignore what the him of only a few minutes ago had done just as Phil was doing. He knelt down to let his fingers scrabble again at the dirt, breaking up the grass until there was only the pure ground underneath for him to grasp at. He took a fistful, sniffed, stared-

...Could it be inferred, how oceans affected growth? How...how...he had once known this, surely, even though his knowledge had been more island-gear. The knowledge didn't come to his mind, though, no matter how much he fished for it, and he left that blank part of him to sigh.

No matter where he'd put the potatoes, it'd have to do. It didn't have to be what he survived on anymore, even if that was what he wanted to happen. This wasn't for sustainability. This was for comfort.

"A field can go down closer to the house," he murmured, and all Phil did was look back at him, eyes clouded with an emotion Techno couldn't name, couldn't pinpoint. Techno let that stare prickle at his back as he retreated, retracing their steps all the way back down to the house, back down to where he pulled out his tools and got to work.

He didn't exactly remember making those original fields, but he knew how to perform maintenance. He knew that he'd need some wood, need some better things to tear up large amounts of dirt, but...that wasn't the point of it all, was it? The point of it was to work, whether it was just with his hands or with specialized tools.

It'd all get done in the end.

Thirty minutes later (a minute later, to Techno, enough time to slip away and then find himself jarringly back to flesh and bone and the ground firm under his feet), Phil stopped him by planting himself in Techno's way. He didn't come close to touching him. He looked conflicted.

"...What do you need me to do, Techno?"

Techno considered the broken ground beneath his feet. Let himself consider the dirt again, a new perspective now that it had been started, and looked back up towards the forest, the one that Phil had looked at with a dubious hum earlier.

It would be small, but he could start by marking part of this soil with the walking stick, making Phil head up there and get some wood for a shoddy fence...

Techno grunted, shook his head, and went back to work. When the fence had to go up, he could do it himself. It didn't matter, the way Phil lingered like a hurt little bee at the edge of his vision. It didn't.

And if he lost himself in the plan, ignoring Phil again and again until the man just sighed, stuck around the outside of the house, and got to his own work around the area...

Well, that was for the best. Techno worked alone.

Phil kept subtly trying to get Techno to *think* about things.

Not think of things in an *easy* way, not like how he could consider the sky in the evening and drift away with the clouds, not like how a freshly-microwaved drink in a mug heated his hands and scalded his tongue in that simple, contented way of the world. He didn't let that happen.

No, Phil kept trying to get him to consider things like the sword that the man often used, especially after he stopped Techno from working on his rough field so he'd eat lunch. Phil practiced something at the edge of the vision, and Techno felt his eyes zero in on that, finding himself wanting to do...*something*. To walk up and stare and...say or think or *do* something, and it made him grit his teeth and look away. *Not today*. But a minute later, Phil would be back in the corner of his vision.

He talked out loud when he wasn't practicing with his sword, spun stories about nights spent by a fire and fishing during storms. This, Techno couldn't fully block out, even as he found himself again slipping from reality- there'd always be a laugh that drew him back as Phil said something to himself, always a swish of the sword that struck a chord inside of Techno.

Techno just wanted to be left *alone*. He just wanted to feel like he could properly breathe, wanted to feel like something other than a wayward charge that had to be near-constantly watched. It got to the point that he snarled whenever Phil got too close, making the other man back off and hover a hand stray over his sword's handle- not to use it, but to keep Techno from doing...whatever he had done a few days ago, back in that tempest of a morning.

At least the farm- more of a garden at this point, honestly- was coming along. He hadn't yet planted any potatoes, simply worked on the state of it and readied it for seeds, but in a look at the pantry the night before, there had to be some potatoes among the seed storage Phil kept.

The act of creating the garden was, perhaps, the only thing that had saved Phil so far from Techno's wrath. If he was on that other side of being, if he was on that other flip of the coin that meant he thought and thought and *thought* about everything- would the mindless work have been enough for the restless energy in him?

As the days progressed, as a few days rolled into one week that rolled into two, as they coexisted and ate and Phil talked and Techno listened, Phil and Techno got very, very slowly to a breaking point.

That *breaking point* came with Phil asking him to *help* with something one evening. Techno trailed after him, looking back longingly at his garden (potatoes freshly planted, wouldn't be grown for a while yet, but it was a comfort to keep weeds out and double-check progress and slowly upgrade everything around it) until Phil stopped at the edge of the woods.

Wait. *The woods?*

When a sword was dropped into his hands, he nearly fumbled and dropped it. He looked at it and then back at Phil, whose eyes glittered with the hardness of granite.

"I can't fight," Techno mumbled.

Lie. Lie. You know it's a lie, deep down inside, don't you? You know the feeling of raking a sword through someone, diving down on them with an axe, breathing in the praise when you're the only one left-

He stopped the intrusive, unknown thought and gripped the sword tighter. Phil didn't budge.

"This is something that needs to be done to keep this place as safe as it can be," he said firmly, staring down at Techno with a sharp eye. "You live here. You help here. You can do this."

I live here because you took me from my home. I live here because you stole me away from my sanctuary and got me to put my trust in you and pushed, and pushed, and pushed even after I got here.

There was something like regret in Phil's eyes. (Wasn't it fascinating, that only now he could properly identify it?) After a beat, though, it cleared back to that solid wall. "You help here," he repeated firmly. "So you're going to go in that forest and make sure monsters aren't waiting to come out if we have to pass through this area soon." A pause. "I will be...out here. I'll know if you try and...not do it."

How...*heartening*.

It was how he found himself a few minutes later out in the darkening wild, alone and holding a sword made of glimmering iron, lightweight and agile. Upon closer inspection, it appeared to be edged with- with diamond. Techno grimaced at it- *how much time had this taken, why did Phil trust me with it, hey, doesn't it actually look like one of the swords on the wall of the bedroom I was given, wait-* sheathed it, and trudged onwards under the embrace of the darkening forest.

He wasn't a fighter. He didn't know what Phil would prove by doing this, he mused, especially after ten, fifteen minutes brought no hiss, no groan of a zombie that he had heard one day as one had crawled out of the woods to die- nothing.

It was probably to be expected that Phil had a trick up his sleeve, but he didn't know *what*. It felt like there were eyes watching him- a figure that darted around when he looked back- but he couldn't find anything. There was no monster to be had, not one running in his veins or showing itself in Phil's eyes or creeping through the underbrush, waiting to strike when he least expected it.

He was safe.

And then he wasn't.

One singular *ssshh-*

-and he plunged the sword deep into a spider, backing up as its surrounding group descended and crowded around him, on the ground and in the trees and *oh, gods, he had no armor*. The spider that he had gotten with a move that he didn't know, something that twisted in and plunged deep and shocked both him and the creature- was ripped apart.

Techno leaned back. He tilted his head up, took in a breath, and let his legs set on memories long shredded and gone, let them balance before he blurred into confused motion-

“Steady- center yourself, like this. You have to have a strong base if you don’t want to get swept off your feet.”

“Come on, Techno! You’re not even letting me get to any of the cool stuff!”

“The cool stuff,” he said mildly, “won’t be cool if you can’t even get the chance to pull them off to begin with.”

“That’s not fair!” The child in front of him threw down his wooden practice sword and gave a scream- one that didn’t even make the two out by the fishing docks, still engrossed in conversation, pause. Techno tilted his head. “I know I can do it, I really can, and I can go out with you and be your partner in all those tournaments that you don’t do because you go solo- even, like, Wilbur- Wilbur, fuckin’ *Wilbur* can do all that cool stuff-”

“He can’t.”

“-and if you don’t let me do it, I’m going to make Ph- what?”

“He *can’t*, Tommy,” Techno repeated, and let his posture finally relax when it seemed Tommy wouldn’t be springing at him for a while yet. “The cool stuff takes...years to pull off.” He waved a hand as if that explained it all, and smirked when Tommy still fumed. “Phil can’t pull most of ‘em off, too.”

“But- he’s years older than you and Wil and-”

“He helps us *survive*, Tommy, he doesn’t go on rampages or fight in tournaments.” Techno raised his sword firmly into the light, tilting it this way and that to let the diamond-edged iron catch the glimmering sun. With a smooth motion, he flung it up- and swept low when Tommy was busy gaping at the showy display, grabbing the forgotten wooden sword and letting his own plunge into the ground where he had stood.

By the time it had sunk into the ground, he had that wooden sword against Tommy’s throat, and the smile on his face was something thin, something *brittle*. Tommy froze.

“I,” Techno said softly, voice saturated with terrible emphasis, “help to *destroy*.”

He panted, heart beating right out of his chest as he stood there, staring down at his untrustworthy hands, at the sword that was clasped tight in them. He couldn't recognize where he was, what was going on- but there were dead spiders in a ring, and he was coated with things he'd rather not have on the clothes he had just been getting used to.

But there were more pressing matters, such as- as- whatever *that* had been.

A child. A sword- no, *two* swords.

Some parts clicked, and others not at all, and all Techno could truly feel was a cold, seething, unstoppable rage pointed at one person in particular. The intensity of it almost swept him away, the sword rattling in his grip, but he managed to sheathe it and...try to calm his breathing down. Neither part of him was used to that kind of rush, that kind of high-riding emotion. One part of him was panicking, used to nothingness- the other felt like that, anyways, but not so...strongly. (Of course, of course.)

What kind of person put their (charge? Friend? *Brother?*) temporary companion into such danger just to 'keep their home safe'? That ambush *screamed* of having been planned, of him having been nudged towards it or the spiders not having been killed before.

For better or for worse, though, there was some part of him that *remembered something*, and it made him want to run. It made him want to tear himself apart bit by bit and scream because *he was not a killer*. He wasn't one who wanted to fight, but he *was*, he was a person who delighted in a challenge but he was still someone who just wanted to farm potatoes.

All he wanted to do was farm potatoes.

All he wanted to do was seek that next high.

All he wanted was to crawl into a small, dark corner and let himself fall apart.

Techno steadied his feet, took in another shuddering, horrid breath, and started on a near-straight line back to where he had started.

He knew these woods. He didn't know these woods. His course led him straight where he expected to go.

He hated that, somewhere inside, he knew that he could never truly separate himself from that everlasting orbit of Phil's home. (*His home?*)

As he walked out of that forest, Phil stood exactly in the same point he had been in before. Techno, with the certainty of a man possessed by someone who was not them, could just *tell* that Phil had followed him the whole time.

Phil looked him up and down. Stared at the sword at his waist, covered in spider guts.

"Let's get you cleaned up, Techno," he said. Soft. *Warm*. Like he had finally seen a true glimpse of what he had been looking for ever since their first meeting in Techno's dead stare.

It just made the punch to Phil's face, hand coated with spider remains and with a near-perfect technique, all the sweeter.

Chapter End Notes

this'll be both in this chapter and in general end notes just so it's not entirely missed.

there is a discord server now! it's not just for the fic, but intended as a general SBI discord, since i really haven't seen any discords that i'd like to join that are pretty chill lately. please be kind, as it's not exactly starting off with a whole lot of people, yeah? i'd love even a few people to regularly chat to!

to hop on over, the link is: <https://discord.gg/5MzGm5YJ9r>

i hope to see at least a few of you there! regular updates and news about the fic will also be available there.

v. the oak tree and its resurrection fern

Chapter Summary

The storm's been broken, and they're left to root around in its aftermath. Phil gives a fishing lesson. Techno is given a familiar piece of clothing.

(Or: Techno didn't exactly expect something to bite, when he cast his line out at the dock's edge.)

Chapter Notes

[chapter title from "resurrection fern" by iron and wine]

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“...I shouldn’t have done that, huh?”

“No,” Techno said, flat and dry, staring up at the ceiling as he dried his own hair. He wrapped a towel around it as soon as he finished changing clothes, leaning against the bedroom door with dark eyes and damp hands. A shower had gotten most of the gunk out, another one had done the trick, and he didn’t regret the trail of water from the bathroom to the room he had been sleeping in at all. “You shouldn’t’ve.”

From the other side of the door, Phil sighed. Techno could hear the *thunk* of his head landing against the door. “I’m the worst older brother,” he murmured. “I just- I just thought...”

He fell quiet. Techno sighed and shook his head before bringing a hand up to the towel that was very much slipping.

“Don’t say that.”

Techno froze as he was adjusting the towel around his hair, just as shocked by the words that slipped out of his mouth as Phil had to be. Silence passed for one beat, two.

“I don’t- really know you that well,” Techno continued in a quieter tone, shrinking as if Phil could actually see him. “But you’re. Alright. When you’re not trying to...make me remember.”

“...Like how I trained in front of you.”

“Mmm.”

“And kept talking about...everything.”

“Mhmm.”

“...I’m sorry, Techno. I just- it was like you were a totally different person- like you *are*-”

“Hm.”

“...And you’re done talking for the evening. I get it, I get it. Doesn’t matter whether it’s because you don’t want to speak to me or...or you’re just all talked out for today.”

He was all talked out for the next *month*, Techno decided instantly, but just picked at the little bit of whatever was under his fingernails instead of even humming to respond. He squeezed the towel a bit as an afterthought for all the water in his hair, made sure his clothes weren’t too soaked, and opened the door a crack.

Two watery eyes stared back at him.

“You’ve just...not been *responding* to anything,” Phil whispered. “Not in a talking way, I mean- I mean just in a *recognizing what I’m saying* kind of way. I don’t think you’ve been listening to what I’ve had to say, more than half the time. It’s worrying, you know? I don’t- don’t know what I’d do if I really had lost you for good. Even now, Tommy and Wilbur would handle this horribly. I’m trying my best, Techno. I- I-”

Aw, *fuck*, those were definitely tears.

“I really a-am.”

What was Techno, when he was an amnesiac that ended up stiffly holding his taller older brother as he cried? What was Techno, what kind of monster was he to only feel a wash of sadness as this person broke down, this person that was (*is?*) his brother (but wasn’t, he couldn’t remember, how could he remember that he fought, that he craved that adrenaline, that sense of power, but not remember this fragile person right in front of him?) sob into his pants, Phil on the floor and Techno standing?

Techno looked down at his two hands. They trembled, lightly, and he forced them still. That only made them shake more after a few seconds. *God, how ineffective could he be at comfort, how could he be so horrible-*

He broke a little that night, too, with all the words he wanted to say but couldn’t get out, even when he wheezed from the effort.

Even though I don’t know you, I think I finally might want to try and discover who I used to be.

You- you can help with that, right?

Right?

I still can’t get close, not really, but- I’ll listen, I swear, I swear, Phil-

The moon hung high in the sky. They stayed there, one full of despair and the other a pool of faint sorrow, until Phil's tears dried. Techno refused to take his subsequent apologies for it all- making him go out, forcing him to remember (even if Phil didn't know about it), crying on him afterwards. Perhaps if he let it pass, things would go back to a tolerable *normal*.

Techno only left after that to make hot cocoa- making it like how he had every time since Phil had shown him the proper amount, and tipping in what felt *right* for Phil's. After a moment of consideration- and a moment where his body went by instinct, his mind thinking about something else completely- he dropped a handful of marshmallows into Phil's, collected the two mugs, and sighed. Knocked on the closed door to Phil's room, where the man had retreated after Techno had withdrawn, with his foot.

It creaked open a foot. Then two.

He offered the mug to Phil, who was sat on the edge of a bed, and watched as he teared up again.

"Just how I like it," he whispered, and Techno froze, mind racing a mile a minute- *how did I know that, is he thinking about the false me, am I becoming that false me, no, I can't-* before Phil finally just smiled at him, teary-eyed and quiet, and almost-but-not-quite-closed the door when Techno backed up.

It stayed open a centimeter as if to say *you can come in, if you want. I don't mind.*

Despite all the progress- and the steps back, if one thought about it- from the past twenty-four hours, Techno retreated back to his own room (and wasn't that a hoot, slowly coming to think of it as his room again...although he lacked so, so many of the memories to accompany it-) and let the still piping-hot cocoa burn his tongue and scald his throat in silence.

He closed his eyes.

Maybe the way to drink hot chocolate isn't to have it actually harm me in the process.

...No. What a ludicrous idea.

He kept on drinking until he couldn't taste anything, even if he tried.

The two of them didn't speak a word about that night, about opportunities gone wasted, about the way that the cracks in the both of them widened when Techno backed away from simple companionship. The days passed, and finally, they found their new *normal*.

He hadn't expected to get a bite when sitting on the fishing dock, line in the water and the ocean waves gentle, but he found himself torn out of a blank daydream to feel something... *tugging* on the fishing rod.

Techno blinked down at it. Was it breaking? What was going *on*? It was a moment later that he looked to where the line met the water and saw it rippling a bit.

He considered the fishing rod for a beat and then turned to Phil, who was fishing further down the dock, closer to its end.

...What could he do if he wanted to grab his attention- no. No, the only thing that would do it was talking, and even if he stayed mostly silent, he'd have to get Phil's attention in *some* way that involved making noise.

"Phil," he called out, just barely audible over the gentle oceanside atmosphere. Thankfully, Phil's sharp hearing had him turn around, and Techno was able to let go with one hand to gesture at what the other hand was holding.

"...What do I do?"

Another beat or two- and then Phil was cackling, almost letting go of his own tool in his amusement. Techno frowned at him. What was so funny about it? There wasn't supposed to be anything to catch the line! Was it a rock? Was it something else? Phil had only joined him a few minutes ago, and-

"Techno," the man wheezed, a rattling sound of delight, "you have a- a fish on the line! Reel-reel it in!"

What the fuck?

He did as he was told, marveling at the fact that the line didn't go easily. Something tugged at it, swerved, and he reeled it in faster, held the tool tighter...to find, in fact, a wriggling *fish* on the end of the line. That was what he assumed, at least- Phil had called it a fish. If he was hard pressed, he'd just call it *strange*. He grimaced at it and ignored Phil's continued wheezing.

"This is just," he laughed, "like the first time I took you fishing, oh gods, almost the exact same-"

The frown wavered on Techno's face. He considered the fish a second longer, and fully reeled the fish in to lay it in his lap, hold it still, and slowly...unhook it from the end, careful and smooth. It struggled, but with enough force it got out without too much injury, and Techno let it slip into the water to swim away.

"What," Techno said slowly, eyes on the ocean in front of him, "was I like back then?"

All he could hear was the ocean, the murmur of the tides, the birds *cawing* from far away. Phil's little intake of breath at his first inquiry about himself.

Not quite ‘what was I like’ in general- but Phil seemed to get the idea. He reeled in his own line- empty- and came to sit next to Techno, maintaining the distance that Techno had regularly established between them since Phil had found them. Good. If I want hugs, or to be touched on the shoulder, or- whatever- I’ll start it. Good. This is fine.

“You’re still pretty similar, at heart,” Phil said, quiet as they sat there, as he cast a line again. After a minute, Techno did the same. “...Even though it can be a whole canyon away for other things. Always pretty quiet, pretty blunt. It’s just that memories shape people, yeah?” Techno glanced over to see Phil’s smile grown crooked again, just like how they had stared at each other over a low fire so long and so near ago.

He thought of that person from a week, two weeks, two and a half weeks ago, watching him bake potatoes, their tired face overlayed on the more fond look of today.

“I found you in a forest, fighting monsters with a sword of red stone from the Nether.” What in the world was the ‘Nether’? “A hell of a fighter, even as a little kid. I was young- a dumb teenager, fresh away from home and determined to have my own life just like all the stories about small servers went- and I found Wilbur a few months into my new life, and then I found you a year after that.”

Techno breathed in the air sharply and let it out with a long, measured exhale. His line swayed with the breeze.

A red sword. Red stone. Red.

He could get a flash there, a scent there- blood, pine needles, lavender, *home*.

A scream.

Was it possible at all to block one’s memories? Could he get all of the information about the stranger that used to wear his skin and keep that as a separate thing, like a story? Oh, how he wished that would be the case.

“You were so *small*,” Phil said, awe and wonder tracing his voice as he stretched an arm out as if to show him a height. “And you were a bit feral, but it wasn’t that bad, I’m pretty sure that you...well. No, you actually were mostly feral, didn’t know any human language. I mean, I wasn’t exactly on a private server at the time like I’ve been for years and years now, but barely anyone was on that one, and it was *old*. Someone must have- left you in the Nether, after you were born. Sometimes, hybrids...”

Techno grunted. Hybrids? Not knowing language? The only explanation for it was that the person who Phil thought he was really was a stranger, but that memory, training that child, the people on the dock-

...It had to be real in some fashion, right?

If he focused on his slowly blossoming headache, he thought he could reach to the deepest parts of the haze that clouded his recall, but it was all harsh-sounding words and growled syllables and clashing sounds.

Once upon a time, the him of the past had been a child. *Feral*.

Feral as in foxes, as in animals? As in the spiders that he had fought days ago?

“...You never really wanted to talk about it.” Phil murmured. “So. You’re the only one who really...” He waved a hand. “Could know about the time before I found you. Dig down deep, or something. But I figured some parts out. You were sharp and smart, but you couldn’t really speak that well and you wanted your alone time. You and Wilbur were at each other’s throats whenever he got a bit too curious. Fun times, dragging the two of you apart.”

Something tugged on Phil’s line. There was a moment where Phil paused, and then sprung into action, reeling it in expertly to find...a small fish on the end of the line.

“Too small to eat,” he declared, and let it slip back into the water just like Techno had done.

Huh.

“But...yeah.” Phil chuckled. “A fighter.” He cast the line back out. “A farmer, when you seemed to get bored of the bulk of what you were doing. But...in the end...in the end, those two aren’t too different in your context if you think about it, you know? It’s in your blood, and then it’s there to stay. Two sides of the same coin, fighting and farming.”

“Not really,” Techno breathed out, clenching the fishing rod just a bit too hard. “Not even...close.”

“Give it time, Techno. Just a bit more time.”

On the wind, Techno could have sworn that there was cinnamon, warmth, the feeling of days gone by wrapping around him- and then it was just the two of them, salt and water biting at his skin, and there was a fish once again tugging on his line.

How long did he have to wait to gain more than a glimpse, more than a clue? How long did he have to wait until everything clicked and the frustration of being locked behind a gate finally passed? What kind of creature would he be once the gates threw themselves open, pulling him into a forceful metamorphosis?

He cared for the man beside him, cared for him enough to follow his word even when he thought it dubious, enough to comfort him in the middle of the night, but he didn’t know the exact reasons *why*. Stories didn’t tell him anything that was really, truly worth it.

He mulled it over, tossed and turned the thoughts in his mind like a cat playing with a small ball of yarn. The wind tickled at the loose strands of hair that had escaped from his lazy ponytail.

The fish that he pulled out glimmered in the light, long and sharp and with eyes like rubies. He let it wriggle from side to side and watched it flash at every turn. Watched it squirm, for a second or two, flicking water everywhere it went.

Time, Phil had said. *Give it time*.

He let the fish free. Phil seemed to be examining a new catch of his own that could make for a better meal, and he'd rather not watch Phil prepare a fish with eyes shinning the same color as its blood-

This was...a nice place to spend some time in. The dock, while it wasn't the garden, could lull him into staying for hours on end sitting at its edge.

Phil clearly seemed to appreciate a fishing partner, at least.

Time did not stop in this world for a lost farmer and his so-called brother. Techno measured that endless march of the sever less in *days* and *hours* and *minutes* and measured it instead in *moments*, in *smells*, in *memories*.

He and Phil shared hot cocoa one other sleepless night, perching on a couch in the living room that Techno had been avoiding. He breathed it in, the warmth and peace and quiet- and one piece of the puzzle unobtrusively settled itself into place.

Movies had been watched there. Board games had been fought over, even though the exact arguments, the exact voices had been forgotten. His eyes passed over a photo and a thought flickered into being:

Gods, Tommy looks like such a nerd there.

His fingers clenched tighter around his mug. Phil started on about some story of a fish that he had caught a few months ago in the middle of a storm, and Techno wondered if this was how *remembering* was supposed to go- one step forward, a half-step back. He took another sip.

Weeks after arriving, after trials and tribulations and a gradual shrinkage of personal space, Phil checked over his own communicator with a pensive frown and ignored it for the millionth time since they had gotten there. He put it away, left the room, and came back to present Techno with a bright red cloak, something that he had apparently been working on during nights he couldn't sleep, during the scarce moments when he wasn't in Techno's sight.

He ran his fingers over the material, soft and plush and *warm*, and a shock of cold air hit him before he realized it was just his imagination, a faint hint of laughter passing through a time long past.

"Look, look, Phil! He's all wrapped up like a little Techno burrito! You only- hah- you only know it's him by the hair!"

"That just means he likes it, Wilbur. Good choice on the color, mate, wasn't sure what dye I wanted to use."

"I know what goes well with how he looks, I'm not stupid."

“Never said you were, Wil. Oh- you’re awake, Techno? Do you need me to start the fireplace up again? ‘S it too cold for you? Gods, you’re always too cold, even with a blanket, it’s not even properly winter yet...”

He ran his fingers over the soft surface of the cloak again and again, let one hand comb through the white fluff that bordered it.

This was his.

This was his.

A strum of possessiveness ran over him, all *mine, mine, mine*, and he clutched it close, gathered it all up and put his face into it. The strong scent of lavender clinging to it, so different from the dried bundles in the wardrobe- tickled at his nose, and he sneezed, but it didn’t stop him from clutching at it all the same. There was something that tried to scratch at the back of his mind, that said *shouldn’t this have something more on it*, but that was easily ignored in his simple joy.

“Thank you,” he murmured, not looking at Phil, not even daring to see how the man reacted to him. “Thank you, thank you, thank you, thank-”

He was wrapped into a hug, and it made him almost choke, caught up in something far beyond his understanding that was in the forefront of his mind, not pushing Phil away. It made him tremble, made him crack open like an egg upon the living room floor, and he didn’t realize that he was stuck between crying and laughing until the cloak was pulled away from his face to see Phil’s own teary gaze.

They stared at each other- Phil clearly worried for a second before sheer relief floated across his face.

“I’m- I’m glad that you like it,” Phil said, clearly choked up, and gathered him once again into his arms like the wayward child that he so clearly seemed to be.

He was an adult, but he had never felt more like someone small, someone unable to care for themselves, reacting to something so simple as a piece of clothing.

But it wasn’t just clothing, was it? It was a piece of his life that he had just been given back, and his mind had recognized that. It was a piece of the life that seemed so far away, far away enough to him to make it feel like the different parts of him were on two sides of a canyon.

It only made him split further down the middle, losing himself in hysteria.

The next few days, that cloak stayed fastened close, stayed pristine and well cared for. Even when he tended the fields, it weighed lightly on his shoulders, moving with the wind, even as dirt clawed at its bottom half. He washed it, he kept it safe, he kept it clean- and a part of him felt all the more whole for it.

He gathered a fresh bunch of lavender to bundle inside of it during the night, gathered more to place in his wardrobe to replace the old bits so that the rest of his clothes had more than

just traces of the same, and tried to ignore exactly why lavender had been so on his mind, lately.

A chuckle at the corner of his hearing: “*You never smell like you’re going into battle, Techno.*”

“*Why make my enemies suspect that the person in front of them will be their doom?*”

“*...But you end up covered in shit anyways!*”

“*So?*”

“*So- why the hell would you do that if it’s all going to be ruined?*”

“*Train with me for a thousand years, Wilbur, and perhaps you will find the answer.*”

“*TECHNO!*”

“I don’t think I’ll ever be the same person that you knew me as,” Techno said one day, out of the blue as the two of them were harvesting a few early-to-harvest potatoes. It was a thought that had crawled over his mind, intrusive and cold, and he had mulled it over for a week, already nearly a month and a half into living there with Phil, everything still so far out of reach.

Phil snorted. “You’ll always be the little gremlin that tried to stab through my boots,” he said fondly, and Techno’s hands spasmed around what he held. “Even if you don’t remember it happening. You’ll always be the kid that got too cold too quick and shivered in early fall, the kid that made me tea whenever I got so much as a cough.”

“I don’t remember,” he said back, a murmur that grew to harsh, biting mutters. “It’s been weeks and I still don’t remember.”

Weeks and weeks and weeks.

“You know,” Phil said after a long moment of silence, “Wilbur and Tommy will be knocking on my door soon if I keep telling them half-truths about what’s going on, keep telling them that I’m keeping tabs on Hypixel’s admins as they ‘search’ for you. They’ll knock on my door and come in to question me, and they’ll find their brother.”

“They’ll find a shell,” Techno corrected. Simple. Clean. Accurate.

“They’ll find the brother they love and they’ll drop *everything* to help you remember, even if they get pissed at me because of what’s happened,” Phil said strongly, dropping his gathered potatoes into a bag and turning to stare Techno down. “And even if you don’t get everything back, you’ll make *new* memories.”

New memories, indeed, like fishing and farming and going out into the wilderness, watching Phil’s back ever since the *incident* that still made his skin crawl, picking off one zombie here, a spider there, a skeleton somewhere else. Like picking up a bow under Phil’s careful watch and getting a bullseye first try, breath catching in his throat as he tried to not feel horrified.

Like old movies that Techno had found himself mumbling some of the words to before catching himself. Like hot chocolate and lavender tea and warmed milk with honey, or the novelty that was baked potatoes with extra toppings, with butter and cheese and sour cream and so much *more*.

“What if-”

Techno paused, thought better of what he was going to say, and fell silent.

“What if...what?” Phil nudged him, that careful distance crossed with a gentleness that Techno couldn’t fault him for.

“What if I don’t *want* them around?”

“...You can’t avoid them forever.”

Techno grunted. That was obvious, especially given how often Phil had talked about them lately.

“...Then I’ll tell them you want to be alone for an hour or two, and they’ll understand. You got overwhelmed before,” Phil said, “and they know how to deal with that. You may be different, but you’re the Techno I know, just like I said. Give me some credit- I know what our brothers are like.”

A ripple of guilt hit him. He didn’t show it, and dumped his own potatoes into the same bag. A paltry gathering, but then again, Phil had so much *more* than potatoes. (It seemed like Techno gardening had spurred Phil into a gardening craze- he’d had nothing to do with it, but small plots for carrots, wheat, turnips and more had popped up in a little ring around the potatoes. He couldn’t find a reason to resent it. They gave the garden some interest.)

“I love you, Techno,” Phil said, and it came out just as easy as the hundreds of other times he had said it in the past month and a half, smooth as butter in the morning chill.

Techno looked at anywhere but Phil, tried to withdraw like a turtle in a shell of soft red.

“You don’t have to say it back,” he tacked on, and Techno clenched his fists tighter, tighter, helpless to stop the way that his throat tightened in response. “...I know. But. It doesn’t change how I feel.”

I’d like to love you too, he thought, throat refusing to relax as he stared at the ground. *I’d like to. I really would.*

I just don’t know myself enough to know enough about you, too.

Chapter End Notes

we're really into the introspective part, folks. stick around and see...something when the next update appears, i suppose! or join the discord while i cry about sbi or get annoyed about things like 'rona. big vibes, here.

have a great night! stay safe, wear masks! WEAR THEM-

vi. anger is just love, left out, gone to vinegar

Chapter Summary

Speak of the devils, and they shall appear. Phil's too tired for this. Techno just wants a sandwich.

(Or: In this world, Pogtopia didn't have a third brother to bolster its efforts, and nobody's exactly having a *good* time.)

Chapter Notes

[chapter title from "the crow" by dessa]

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

[tommyinnit]: phil any updates

[tommyinnit]: it'd be great if you could give us any big guy it's been over like TWO M
ONTHS

[phil]: Sorry, Tommy, things have been a bit hectic.

[tommyinnit]: TELL ME ABOUT IT

[phil]: Has everything been going alright with you and Wil?

[tommyinnit]: WE KEEP FORGETTING TO INSTALL FUCKIGN RAILISNGS IN
POGTOPI A

[wilbursoot]: Hey, Phil

[read ✓]

[wilbursoot]: You answer TOMMY AND NOT ME-

[wilbursoot]: We're getting worried

[phil]: Don't be. Was just a bit busy, sorry. Could only take a second to check that earlier after I messaged Tommy. Is everything alright?

[wilbursoot]: Where's Techno, Phil?

[phil]: Guess I should have expected that.

[wilbursoot]: You're just not giving us a straight answer and

[wilbursoot]: Fuck

[wilbursoot]: We need him, okay? We need him and where else could he be but farming potatoes or some shit? You checked that part of Hypixel, right? Did you check his apartment in the main city? Anything? Any tournament sightings at ALL? It's a long shot but

[wilbursoot]: Is Hypixel blocking you? They trained you as a private server admin you have capital P Permissions, right? What the fuck's going ON

[phil]: I'm getting closer, Wil. Just another week or two. I'm getting closer.

[wilbursoot]: Yeah

[wilbursoot]: Sure

[phil]: I miss him just as much as you two do. Give me some credit.

[read ✓]

[phil]: Okay. Fine. I'll get back to searching, then.

[wilbursoot]: I'm grounding you if you don't stop almost pushing Tubbo off of the stairs

[wilbursoot]: Or he can push you off of them that's a fitting punishment

[tommyinnit]: Bitch

[tommyinnit]: is it a CRIME to have FUN FOR ONCE

[wilbursoot]: Come on.

[tommyinnit]: ugh it's fine i get it

[tommyinnit]: wait who were you texting

[tommyinnit]: PHIL?

[wilbursoot]: Yeah what about it

[tommyinnit]: I need a break from Pogtopia let me go and see if he's even looking for him
cmon DONT GUIVE ME T HAT LOOK FROM OTHER THERE I KNOW YOU WANT
TO DO IT TOO

[wilbursoot]: I don't want to leave Pogtopia undefended, Tommy

[wilbursoot]: Or just defended by one person.

[tommyinnit]: if you let me go for a day I PINKY PROMISE to not try and push Tubbo
again (evcebn if he DESERVES IT)

[wilbursoot]: I can't stop you can I

[tommyinnit]: HAHA NOPE

Almost as if Phil's musings on his brothers were dark omens, someone knocked on the door a few days after, leaving Techno to slowly come to a stop from where he had been making himself a lazy sandwich. His eyes drifted to the door, where there was another knock- and *Phil wasn't there*.

Phil was out, he was getting some carrots from the garden, and *oh gods the door was opening*.

Techno darted to the back of the kitchen, rounding into the small space that was the transition between kitchen and dining room. After the door opened, Techno's heart stalling in his chest, a loud voice echoed through the house-

“PHIL! Big man! Where ARE you? You haven’t been answering any of my messages, again! Come on!”

At the silence that met them, the voice- young, bratty, *loud*- called out once again. “Phil, where *are* you? I know you’re around here, coward! The teleporter woulda’ blocked me if you weren’t!”

His heart beat louder, louder, louder.

Nothing from Phil came back. (Obviously). There was no faint voice from the garden of Phil telling them to wait. There was only the kid’s groan, and their stomping around- down the

hallway, opening a door, and slamming it with a groan before they stomped right back towards where Techno was hiding.

“Asshole,” they muttered in the silence. “Won’t even fuckin’ answer me if he’s in here. Won’t check his communicator. We get worried and this is the thanks I get- ooh, is that a sandwich I see, what kind-”

And then the boy- blonde, bright eyes, red and white shirt- stood in front of him, and Techno held his breath, praying to all the things he couldn’t think of that he wouldn’t. Turn. *Around*.

“Don’t mind if I do...”

Ah. That was *his* sandwich getting snapped up, everything he had laid out plopped down before they- he? They?- took a big bite out of it. The boy- *Tommy*, his mind whispered gleefully, *Tommy Tommy Tommy*- hummed, clearly pleased despite his annoyance at Phil’s absence, and turned to go through the dining room to the living room-

-and ran straight into Techno, where he bumped into him with a yelp and stumbled back, more focused on the sandwich for a split second. “Phil! Don’t fucking prank me like- like... that...”

Their eyes met- Techno’s wide, dark eyes. Tommy’s shocked gaze.

They stared at each other for a long stretch of time. Neither moved- Techno was frozen in time, the only sign of life being his hands as they started to tremble. Tommy stared up at him as if he had seen a ghost.

(Perhaps he *had* seen a ghost, huh?)

“*Techno?*”

“This isn’t- what it looks like,” he managed to wheeze out, and immediately got an armful of *loud child* for his troubles. He didn’t know him, didn’t know the proper response, the unspoken rules to interaction. Techno just stayed as still as a board, heart beating in frantic half-steps, and tried to act like a part of the scenery. *I’m just a pillar, I’m just a pillar, I’m...*

“You *asshole!* Why haven’t you told us where you’ve been?” Tommy sounded *pissed*. Fuming. Techno gulped and opened his mouth to answer, but got talked right over by this- by this child, this person that something deep in him delighted in seeing but the rest of him could only be terrified of. “We were **WORRIED** about you, and you didn’t answer anything from us for- for- for months! And you still haven’t told us you were at Phil’s!”

Tommy paused. “....*Phil* hasn’t even told us you were here, what the *fuck*, we could have used your help and- and how long’s it been since he started searching? Two and a half months? *Fuck!*”

No, no, no, Tommy wasn’t allowed to tear up, his heart said, even as his mind screamed *get away run away find Phil run run run*. Techno’s hands flailed midair, but got nowhere in his attempts to do...whatever his subconscious had been trying to get him to do.

“You’re really the worst, Techno, y-you’re...Techno?”

In his failed attempt to calm the boy, Techno had just frozen up even further. Tommy peered up at him...and obviously was alarmed by what he saw. “Techno, what’s going- what’s going on? Is everything alright? Did something happen? Do I need to- to beat someone up?”

No. No, everything isn’t alright, because you’re here and asking all the questions I don’t want to answer.

“You’re not strong enough to fight my battles for me, kid,” some part of him said out loud, right on some damned, hellish autopilot, and that seemed to kick Tommy right from sadness and over into anger, hands reaching out to grab at his shirt and grip it tight.

“*You listen here, big guy-*”

“Techno!”

Oh. Okay. This was happening now.

“Got some carrots here, you wanted them, ri-right?”

Techno turned his head to see Phil, turned to see his jaw dropped as he stared at the two of them. He didn’t know how they looked, Tommy’s fists clenching the front of his shirt, his own blank face and Tommy’s almost-tears, but it drew the encounter to a stuttering standstill.

“...Tommy,” Phil said, setting the basket of carrots he had down gingerly on the counter. “...I see you’ve, uh...seen Techno?”

“You *hid him from us*,” Tommy said, flat and frigid, withdrawing his hands and letting them ball into fists at his sides. “Phil, you hid him from us- we need all the help we can get, over in Dream’s world, over in Pogtopia, and you *hide him?*” He snorted. “Come on, Techno, we need your help, go get your axe-”

Phil’s hand clamped around Tommy’s wrist. The boy stopped his jagged movements to tilt his head up to him. He looked back at Techno, and blinked slowly at Techno’s frozen figure.

“Techno,” Phil said softly, an unbending *strength* behind his words, “is not going anywhere.”

“And why the fuck not, huh, Phil?”

“Because-”

“Because,” Techno said slowly, the force of an incoming disaster bolstering him into speaking with jagged, half-formed sentences, “I was...trapped on my island...apparently bugged-”

“Definitely bugged, I talked with the Hypixel admins, even Simon, and you know how hard it is to get a hold of him-”

“-and,” Techno continued on, finally finding his stride, “farmed potatoes for an unknown amount of time while I, uh. Forgot almost everything about my life.” His life? Someone else’s life? Tommy had been in that memory, he knew. Had been in other faint memories.

It was still someone else’s life that he was remembering.

“Bullshit,” Tommy said, and then, louder: “That’s *bullshit!* You can’t just- you can’t...”

“Tommy. *Tommy, Techno didn’t even know who I was when I found him.*”

Silence.

“*What?*”

“I’m just trying to get Techno to remember bits and pieces,” Phil told him, and Techno looked away when he identified the clear strain in his voice. “He’s not fit to go anywhere, Tommy, and especially not fit to go into whatever mess you and Wil got yourselves into.”

“But...Pogtopia...”

“*Your brother is more important than your damn resistance, Tommy!*”

He shouldn’t be here. It wasn’t right. They were referencing things that went over his head, details that even he didn’t want to think of- all he wanted to do now was ignore the fact that he was hungry and just...go out. Check on the potatoes. Check for monsters, maybe tell Phil if he saw any that were bold enough to lurk at the edge of the forest’s shadow in daylight.

“I’ll just-”

They both turned to him with a terrifying intensity in their eyes.

“I’ll just- be going,” Techno choked out, and was gone through the back door before Phil could so much as reach out.

Silence reigned in his wake as he stood right outside the entrance, trying to calm his breathing, listening to the last snippets of conversation that he could stand before he actually went to farm potatoes.

“Phil-”

“I read your messages, you know? What good would it be to send him out to fight? Yes, he’s good, but right now-”

Techno started to walk away. He refused to listen to them talk about before.

“-remember when he was in those tournaments-”

“-not now, not *ever*; as far as I’m concerned-”

“-but he’s the Blood God-”

That was too much for today. Off to potatoes he went.

Come to think of it, he had never actually gotten anything to eat, had he?

...No, he wasn't going to try braving the house again for a while yet, not while the stranger- his younger brother- while Tommy was still there.

Maybe he could improve the little path he had marked through the garden. That'd be nice.

"Me and Wilbur are *still* trying to build back up! We have Tubbo, but nobody else is on our side, even Tubbo's not publicly on our side, what L'manburg once was is being fucking- *ruined*!"

"Leave it. *Go*. You're either going to sit your ass back in Dream's server or go and get Wilbur and bring him back here, and I hope to everything that you know the right choice here."

"Phil..."

"You lost. Leave it and *come home*. Your brother- your *brothers*- need you two."

When Tommy left, a hurricane of emotions sweeping across the land in his wake, Techno could only feel relief. Even with that storm in his mind, things felt quieter before- even if he hadn't heard whatever discussion they were having, even if the only things he heard besides nature in the past hour were Tommy's sudden slamming of the front door, cursing up a storm as he left.

"He's. Sure something," Techno managed to get out when Phil finally approached him, only those words leaving his mouth before it clicked shut and refused to open again, no matter how many dry observations he had about the kid. Phil's answering laugh was devoid of true amusement, but he shrugged and gestured for Techno to follow- and follow he did, biting at his lip and trying to ignore the ache of hunger in his stomach.

"He's Tommy," Phil said, mild even over the tired anger he exuded, love for Tommy still present in his sigh. "...You were having a sandwich, right?"

Techno gestured in the direction of where Tommy had left, as if it were all that needed to be communicated.

"...And he took it. Alright. I'll clean these, you can make another sandwich...and how about spending the day inside? Seems like it's a cloudy day...no rain, so it's not good for fishing,

and everything's already set up with your potatoes, it seems, yeah?"

Techno...looked down at his dirtied hands. Clenched them to watch as his vision tried to layer on red where only dirt laid. Slowly unclenched them and watched what he saw turn back to regular dirt. He gave one slow nod before moving, drifting off into the kitchen to wash his hands with the mindlessness of someone lost in thought. Next to him, Phil busied himself with washing off carrots and beginning to slice some up into thin strips.

Tommy had wanted help with something- with a *revolution*, Phil had mentioned. What would have happened if Techno had gone with him? Would he have cut people, instead of monsters, down? Would he have proper blood on his hands?

Did he already have blood on his hands?

He decided not to dwell on the thought- on any thoughts at all, actually. Phil seemed to be in the same mindset, and so they both let themselves quietly move about, making their own lunches after they finished cleaning up, a song and dance that felt *old*, that felt like *routine*.

Techno couldn't bring himself to care.

They sat across from each other at the cozy little dining table. Techno focused on his food, on the sandwich that he had reconstructed, the other long gone with Tommy out and away.

Mm. It really *was* good. The carrots were, too, which was pleasant, if not anything approaching surprising- Phil had taken good care of them. Slowly but surely, though, Techno was branching out on food options that he would eat.

His fingers drummed against the table, idle and fidgety. *Tap, tap, tap*. His mind was trying to go somewhere, but he couldn't quite follow its confusing path, so he kept going through long patches of blankness before he caught a glimpse of a grin, an echo of a laugh.

The sandwich was gone before he knew it.

"I'll put on a movie," Phil murmured, and even though it was the middle of the day (and not the evening, the time when Phil seemed to prefer movies be shown at- was there some etiquette to it? Movies were growing more familiar, but he didn't get that part of it, not when all it took to watch something was to fiddle around with the enigma that was the television system), Techno silently curled up on the couch to watch alongside him.

If he slowly fell asleep to the droning of someone's voice and the sounds of mystery and intrigue, well, only Phil was there to see it.

It felt like he'd need the rest, if Tommy were to return. He was *far* too loud for him to even think of regularly handling.

“Wilbur! Wilbur!”

“What? I’m *working* on something-”

“Phil found Techno.”

“...What? Where is he? Did you bring him? This could be *just* what we need-”

“Wilbur, he- he needs us there. Something’s happened. Something bad. He...I...I love L’manburg, I really do, but. He *needs* us.”

The screech of a chair. The clenching of hands on its back.

“What the fuck happened to him.”

“I’m leaving. With or- or without you. Phil gave me a choice, and I’m choosing the only right answer. Just...come with me, please? Techno...Phil...they need you. They need us. Please. I can explain on the way. Now.”

“...”

“Wil-”

“Let me grab my things. ...At least *Schlatt* can take care of our former nation while we’re gone.”

When Dream descended upon Pogtopia, gifts and promises ready on his lips, he found only an abandoned ravine for his troubles.

It was with a lethargic groan that Techno stretched and opened his eyes, finding his gaze set on the living room ceiling. There was something that scratched at his mind, but it was hard to recognize until what he was sensing fully processed- voices, low and quiet, over by the front door.

Strangers.

“Quiet, boys. Techno’s sleeping. I think he might have stayed up all last night, just...let him sleep. I’ll explain it all, okay? Just...come over here. To Tommy’s room. It might be a bit dusty, yes, but it’s the furthest away, and he’s still a light sleeper.”

Techno let his body relax once more after the words processed in his mind as *Phil*, and before he could actually think about what he had said, Techno was back asleep, deep in the realm of sleep. Ah, blissful sleep.

He didn't wake until the early afternoon to see two near-strangers- Tommy and the other person he had seen in pictures around the house- staring owlishly at him.

Somehow, it was hard to think that he'd like this at all.

The presence of two new people in the house, people that Techno knew by name but didn't *know*, left him crackling with unreleased tension, jumpy and irritable. By that night's dinner, the first one they all had together- at least in Techno's eyes- there was a deep scowl on his face, and he skipped it all just to stay in the garden. He hid away by the simple merit of sitting next to a bush and staying in the darkest bit of shadow.

(*All warfare is based on deception.* They'd never see him there. Wait, what was that from?)

They were fine. It was *fine*. It was just Techno that was messing it all up, wanting to snap and bristle and lash out whenever they talked, whenever they tried to push something or mention things he didn't know.

In the matter of a few hours, they had gotten him to respond automatically to certain phrases and actions, say things he had no idea about, no clue where they originated from, and it only drove him up the *wall* to think about the fact. He wanted to farm, he wanted to sneak into the forest and mindlessly keep a lookout for monsters- but instead of all that, instead of lingering in the garden for even longer and have one of those two nightmares find him...

Well, it was Phil who found him. Not those two. The aftermath still ended up similar to how he had expected it- Phil fretting over him, bringing him inside, and the other two hovering around and speaking constantly.

There was no escape.

The second day, one of them always trailed him. The worst part was that, in some ways, they were nice. Kind. Brotherly. Tommy still spoke with an intensity, though, that made Techno shrink away, nudging at him and egging him on as if he was with the Techno of a few months or years or whatever ago.

Fond insults were not the way to get into his heart. Not at the moment, at least.

Wilbur referenced things even more blatantly than Phil had tried to do. Had gone on and said things that required a voice to meet them, and a creature within him had echoed the expected reply to find a grin full of teeth and a congratulations on remembering something.

What was there to remember besides a line without any context? A shard of time that had no connecting pieces? The words always died in his mouth, though, as Wilbur merrily continued on the conversation, the wry, chill foil to Tommy's blazing fire.

What was there to remember besides the static-crackle backing to a song that he could only clearly hear one instrument of?

“He’s remembering,” he heard Wilbur gleefully say to Phil behind his back, far enough away that Techno thought, perhaps, that they didn’t think he could hear them. “Even those stupid Tzu-whatever quotes! Maybe it was just us, huh?”

Techno’s shoulders drew themselves into a line that had only truly been matched at his first encounter with Philza on his island.

He could feel his scars acting up, but he couldn’t figure out if it was because there was light rain on the horizon or if it was because of stress. Either way, he looked at himself in the mirror after showering one night and just stood there, drinking in the way that he could see each and every scar that was paining him.

Right there, from his collarbone and dragging itself down deep. A length over, where a particularly large wound spread out in its domain across his side. His knee, which wasn’t noticeable, per se, but ached like no tomorrow when he woke, when he was tired, when storms threatened to approach.

Techno was so tired of this. Of them, of his wounds, of sentences that jumbled around in his head and didn’t even get anything attached to them, not like the carefully drawn out memories that Phil tried hard to slowly free.

He hated them. (He hated what they were doing.)

He wanted them *gone*.

On the third, on the fourth day- he got to his own little breaking point. Techno snapped and snarled even more than he had at Phil, gave short responses to both Tommy and Wilbur, burrowing into his cloak and glaring at them with an intensity that seemed to finally, finally give them pause.

They had the audacity to ask him why he was so- why he was so *standoffish*.

“Why? Why?” When the line had finally been crossed, he laughed. He laughed and laughed and *laughed* and ignored the way that Phil, barely within the range of hearing for it, glanced over with alarm. Ignored the way that both Tommy and Wilbur, who had cornered him, sported wide eyes and shocked looks.

“You’re- you’re forcing me to say things and you don’t know why I hate it? I barely remember you- you two! I barely know you! I barely know Phil and I’ve been here for over a month! Almost two!”

Neither of them stopped him. Maybe it was because those were the most words they had heard him say outside of the lines they had teased out since they arrived. Maybe it was because his tone was that of a cornered animal.

Who could know for sure?

"You've been here for two, *two* days and you're making me do things I don't want to do! I can't get any space! There's no fucking room! How can I breathe with you two over my shoulder?"

"Techno-"

"Don't 'Techno' me," he breathed, turning a furious gaze on Tommy. On Wilbur. "Don't 'Techno' me. I don't know you. Don't even try to act like I know- know you."

They were in memories that he had fished up from the ether. They were not in *his* memories, though, and that was what mattered.

"Just go away! Go away and I'll talk to Phil and- and-"

"Techno."

He flinched. Let his gaze sweep from the two 'brothers' and over to where Phil stood behind them, looking as if the ground had dropped from under his feet.

"Boys."

Techno shut his mouth, ignored the ways that he was still trembling, the way that his fists clenched tight, ignored the low sound coming out of his mouth, all anger and fear and frustration.

"Techno," Phil repeated, soft as if he hadn't cut through the tension with a blade two seconds ago, "I need to talk with these two. Would you mind heading away for a bit? You're not in trouble. I think I've just been misled about what exactly they've been doing with you, huh?"

He could see Tommy and Wilbur gulp.

He fled the scene without so much as a glance back.

"We need to talk," he could hear Phil say, *danger* in his voice. "Again."

Techno carefully climbed onto the roof, scaling it half by muscle memory and half by merit of the way that the building lent itself to climbing. *Maybe it had been built to be climbed onto and sat on. Huh.*

They were nice people. They were *too* nice, even as they showed that they weren't just... being nice. Tommy was a mousy child, Wilbur cracking bad jokes and always...strumming the guitar he had picked up the second he got there. They were both too focused on him.

(It wasn't as if they were on some kind of crusade to get him on a fast-track to remembering, no. Not at all. That would be silly. That would be silly, yes it would, and Techno totally was

fine with seeing them and living alongside them. Sure.

Hah.)

How hard was peace and quiet to get?

It was dark when Phil sat down beside him, quiet and tired-eyed startling the man and making him reach for a weapon that wasn't there. (Why? Why had he done that? He remembered some, but- that wasn't him. It *wasn't*.)

"I'm sorry," Phil murmured, quiet enough that it didn't carry down. "I didn't...didn't know what they had been doing to you. I was just...I *am* just...glad to have everyone home for once, you know?" His smile was crooked. "I've been alone for the most part for a while. The gang's all back together for once, I thought they were just...catching you up. Not trying to solve *problems*."

That last word sat in the air, marinating in Phil's bitter tone. Intense. Quiet. *Unnerving*.

Techno didn't grant it a response. He just pulled his legs closer to his chest and closed his eyes, leaning his head on his knees.

"I'll make sure they give you space." Phil wrapped an arm around him, slow and ready for Techno to pull away, and rather than stiffen, Techno just sighed and leaned into it. Personal space? Right now, that was a myth. He'd rather have the warm arm around him in the nightly chill, even with the cloak around him, no matter the fact that he had just been trying to escape the other two. Phil was safe. They weren't. "They're just worried like I was. They haven't fully processed just how much you...don't know. And how you haven't, uh, appreciated them- or me- trying to...force memories out of you."

Techno tilted his head to open his eyes and look up at Phil before he flicked his eyes over in the direction of the forest. Phil- Phil *laughed*, the bells of his voice chiming whisper-quiet as to not get them found.

"I deserved that punch, by the way," he said, and squeezed Techno once more before letting go.

He chased that warmth- and then pulled away, a pang in his chest. He liked Phil. He *wanted* to like Phil.

His *past* self was the one that liked Phil. Techno's current self just...he just wanted the warmth. Right.

(There had been something in Phil's voice, earlier. Something that was dark and bothered towards Wilbur and Tommy, something that he was trying so, so hard not to think about. He failed.)

"Let's get you back down without them noticing, eh? We can go through the trapdoor to the little attic, right over here, I'll help you down, you look exhausted..."

When Tommy and Wilbur finally came close to Phil again, they found a sleeping Techno sprawled out on his bed and Phil walking out of the room, closing the door behind him. He turned to look at Wilbur and Tommy, eyes flashing with exhausted remnants of anger.

The two stilled before their older brother's squared-off frame.

"*Please* remember what we talked about," Phil sighed. "You two are better than this."

(Stars above, he was tired.)

Chapter End Notes

is it starting to get juicy, or is this the beginning of the end? that's for you to decide.
hope you liked the slight break from format! it won't come up too much from now on,
but i felt like this chapter needed a little bit of spice.

shoutouts to roman numerals.

vii. the water's rising (quicker than light and sound)

Chapter Summary

Time passes. Potatoes grow. Sometimes, there's only so much you can do before your comfort becomes a vice.

(Or: When your life's going pretty well, there's always a bump along that road to stop that.)

Chapter Notes

[chapter title from "notus" by the oh hellos]

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Almost as if by a miracle, whatever talk Phil had with Wilbur and Tommy, they got a hell of a lot more tolerable in the days after Techno's outburst.

When they weren't constantly all over him, Techno found that he liked Wilbur and Tommy, strangely enough- although he wasn't sure it was like as in 'they're good people, and funny, and nice' or an 'I'd kill someone if they hurt these two, and they'd never find their remains' kind of like. It could also be something inside of him tricking him into thinking those thoughts, so. It was something to ponder some other day.

They spoke not of their personal past with him, but spun tales of a different server, of revolution and wars and carefully- but blatantly- avoided what had to be a vast ravine of actual details and facts beyond *hey, we won this nation a while back*. Techno reeled in his line, released a fish, and sent the hook back out again into the waters as they softly chattered at him.

They weren't demanding responses, weren't spouting out lines that false-him answered like clockwork. That, more than anything else, made him comfortable- although he wouldn't consider them close. Not nearly as close as Phil had gotten, at least.

Tommy asked him about his potatoes, a week into their stay, and *didn't leave* as Techno showed him the different bits of his part of the garden, didn't leave as Techno slowly explained the differences between the varieties of potato in his own halting speech. Instead, Tommy just asked questions upon questions upon *questions* and didn't mind if Techno barely bothered to answer many of them, didn't mind being motioned to get his hands dirty and help

expand the ever-growing garden with a new variety if he wanted to be allowed to run his mouth.

Wilbur brought that familiar guitar with him wherever he went, but it seemed as if he had gone from playing songs that he thought Techno would know and instead started... composing, peppering the background of whatever Techno was doing with plucked strings, with hums and murmurs and occasional breakthroughs- well, just as often as he cursed to himself.

“They’re for my new album,” he explained to Techno when he gave a flat look at one of Wilbur’s cheers of a breakthrough, smiling widely up at Techno from where he sat on the ground. “Gotta get some more stuff out for the fans, you know? Get that clout, get that social capital. Not like it’ll make tons of revenue- not like I need a ton- but still.”

Techno grunted and hoped that his blank face conveyed his faint interest. Wilbur’s smile said he succeeded in...accurately conveying his emotions.

“Want me to play you what I have so far?” He strummed once and winked. “It’s not much, but...”

And so a musician joined the background noise, most often while he ran through menial tasks, as he worked and fished and grew more and more used to the fact that there were actually fish that would bite on the line.

Memories purred against him, gentler now that he wasn’t being forced into remembering. Sure, they were half-recollections, brief flashes of events- of Wilbur showing him one of his earliest songs, of Tommy doggedly following him wherever he went after Phil picked the kid up, of Phil comforting him in the dead of night after he snapped at one of the others, holding tea, holding hot chocolate, holding warmth in the shape of his hands.

They paralleled reality in a way that was almost too close to accept.

Was this what it was like to have a family?

Was this what it felt like to truly be in a home, instead of the way that he sunk into farming back on his own world? His- his (former?) home?

...It was nice, even if they weren’t *his* family.

For a time, his potato farm- his potato garden- was almost like an afterthought. A small routine that wasn’t his whole day. It was a nice...hobby? A nice hobby.

The reach of the island, though, could not be escaped so easily. Techno fell asleep one night to a soft-bed (too-soft, his mind still hissed, the reason why he woke up on the floor half the

time) and awoke to dirt beneath his bare feet, a cloak heavier than the world around his shoulders and mind full of one thing: farming potatoes.

The moon was lowering inch by inch, but as he looked down at the tools in his hands, at the garden around him, he couldn't help but feel as if he were right back in the middle of a vast field, back to the days where he farmed without end, an out of body experience that could not be stopped.

Time blurred. The sun started to rise. Techno busied himself with harvesting all the potatoes that were ready and planting new ones before he checked on his maintenance, weeding and making sure the plants were watered, growing, *happy*.

Somewhere in that time, he had taken off the cloak (no, no, put it back on put it back on mine *this is mine stop-*) and put it at the edge of the field. The chill of the air, now biting as early fall started to pass by, nipped at his skin, sunk down to his core to curl up and stay there.

His mind couldn't focus, not truly. A part of it was on the potatoes, but the rest was almost as if it were full of static, unable to think, unable to feel, swept up in a tide that would not let him get a breath of air.

Techno lost himself in the haze's embrace. When he heard a shout, when something touched him, grasping at his shoulder, he just pulled away and meandered over to check on some of the newer potatoes, the variety that needed just a bit more care and attention than normal.

Everything was fine. He reached for the watering can, mind cast away.

Hands grasped at him, tried to stop him. At some point, it got annoying enough for Techno's body to grunt and pull away, push at the blur in the corner of his sight, the figure in front of him, whatever was behind.

It made him *angry*, that something was trying to stop him. Angry enough through that intense apathy that his body responded.

So he tried to stop whatever was in his path- he let that rage fill him, let it seep out through his skin and make his muscles tense, and before he knew it something was under him, his frame (still too lean, still too light, but it farmed well, considering he just cared for potatoes) still able to keep it down through its struggling.

He growled and tried to stop it, end it for *good-*

Searing pain across his shoulder made Techno stagger back to reality, hyperfocusing on what was in front of him- Tommy, eyes wide and scared like an animal of prey, body shaking like a leaf in the wind. He smelled the tang of blood- his own, he noted idly- dripping from a slash to his arm. Heard his own instinctive yelp fade away, heard the sound of Tommy's breathing and Wilbur's yelling- heard, more than anything, Phil's terrifying silence.

He blinked. Turned his head, all nice and slow, to see his older brother with eyes of obsidian melt into relieved tears. Saw the blade in his hand, blood thin and flecked along its edge.

“You cut me,” Techno heard himself breathe before everything became too much, *too much*, every sound rattling through his head and making him clutch at it with curled fingers. The pain, the slash on his shoulder screamed with the power of a lightning bolt, the smell of his blood overpowering everything else (even the lavender, even the lavender that still tried to cloak him in calm). “You hurt me.”

“I- I *had* to, you were about to hurt Tommy, you were- it was like when you were young, when you were, *were- feral-*”

Techno felt himself rip apart, putting his hands firmly over his ears as he staggered away from Tommy and shook, shook, shook. “Go away,” he whispered, staring into nothing, staring straight at the ground, at the sky beyond it, at the void that didn’t exist. “Go away,” he yelled soon after, and spasmed as arms wrapped around him, their owner clearly ignoring the blood that seeped out of his wound. “Go away, go away, *go away-*”

“I’m not leaving you when you’re like this, Techno,” Tommy’s voice declared, wavering and terrified and yet so strong. *So strong.* “You *need* us here, big man.”

“Get *off of me*,” he growled, an unnatural harshness lurking beneath every damned syllable, but there was nothing to be done. He folded down and sobbed into his knees as he sat there, right in the middle of his now-messy potato field, and broke into pieces that could, perhaps, be as fine as glitter in the wind.

Tommy clung tighter.

“We love you, Techno,” he declared through the tornado that was his thoughts, “and we’ll be right beside you for whatever you need! No matter what!”

He cried harder, Tommy’s words barely processing to him, and watched through clouded eyes as half of the hard work everyone had put into healing, into trying to take his reliance on potatoes away went down the drain, blood seeping down his arm, down his shoulder, staining his grey shirt dark.

Techno didn’t flinch as a healing potion was applied across his arm. His eyes closed as the world shook. He didn’t fight as Tommy and Wilbur worked together to get him to stand up and then stumble over to the house, into the bathroom, and let Phil take over to wash off the blood, properly clean the half-patched wound.

What was there to be done? He had taken two steps forward and ten steps back. He relished in the sting that kept him grounded to the world.

“I’m sorry,” Phil murmured over and over, and as Techno let his head rest against Phil, he thought back: *It’s fine, I forgive you, I forgive you.*

Bits and pieces filtered in through the mess, as Phil examined the slash across his shoulder and slightly down his arm, as a second layer of potions were applied and a bandage was carefully wrapped around his frame.

Techno was helpless to stop his trembling mind from opening doors that he'd rather stay mostly closed.

"Techno."

"Not my fault he went and got himself hurt by a skeleton," Techno muttered, sharpening his axe with a practiced ease right on the house's front steps. "Nerd should'a listened to me. He didn't."

"You know better than that," Phil scolded, and Techno tried his best to not wilt under the disappointed words. "Both you and Wilbur. One of you should have watched over him- the forest at night, really? Even I'd prefer you to bring someone along when you're out there, even if you can handle yourself! It's bad enough how often you go out alone!"

"*You* don't always go with someone," he pointed out, voice flat just as it always was, flat and mild and only accented with the raise of an eyebrow. Phil snorted.

"That's because I'm the oldest- I know you were practically born fighting, but still, Techno-"

"That's mine now, kiddo."

"Hey!" Tommy scowled as Techno held a sandwich over his head, looking from the sandwich to Techno's perfect poker face. "That's mine, you asshole- you know I can't reach that-"

"I know," he intoned gravely, and waved it about as Wilbur, eating his own food at the table, saw them and laughed.

They danced around, Techno's relatively short frame still taller than Tommy at this age, and he found a small smile on his face as the atmosphere settled on him, as he moved just before Tommy could get his cape in his grasp, the kid growling almost like *he* did when he was angry.

Wilbur opened his mouth to speak, still laughing-

"Is there a reason you don't want to speak right now, Techno?"

He made a grunt, curling up further in the depths of his wardrobe, letting his cloak curl around his tiny body. Phil, crouching outside, snorted softly.

“Just not a talker, huh? I think I should have expected it, with you being so quiet, talkin’ like the pigtails...but Wil doesn’t get that, okay? You have’ta give him some slack. He’s used to talking and talking and talking and getting a whole conversation out of me, out of everyone when we visit some of the bigger servers or travel to this place’s biggest village...don’t just try and attack when he wants to get you to talk, okay?”

A grunt.

“Don’t give me that, kiddo.”

Another.

“Oh, now you’re just *teasing* me! You little-”

“This is Wilbur,” Phil said softly, squeezing Techno’s hand all light-like and letting him go a second later. “He lives with me, okay? Just like you’re going to.”

“You look weird,” Wilbur declared loudly, tone mean and harsh, and everything promptly went straight to hell.

Even if he didn’t understand every word- or most of the words- tone could never be mistaken.

Techno lunged forwards, snarling and snapping with rough syllables and small little tusks gleaming in the light, Phil yelping when Techno ripped out of his hold, and Wilbur *screamed*-

He launched a fist towards Wilbur’s face, and Phil caught him just in time, and oh, gods, that *look* on his face, he was going to get killed and he still didn’t totally know who these people were and maybe they were even more bloodthirsty than the creatures he had lived around for the rest of his life-

Heat lingered around him like an old friend. Once, he had been in this portal’s light with desperation ringing counterpoint to his gasping. Once, he had thrown away all he knew to become something more.

He considered the little cave. Considered the small sword in his hands, child-sized and rough.

He stepped back through the portal.

Some things were better left to wait.

Techno opened his eyes, and Phil smiled tiredly back at him, the corners of his eyes crinkling in that kind of way that meant he was truly pleased that Techno was aware of his surroundings. How Techno knew that, he had no idea- but it was good to see. A comfort.

“Do you mind,” Phil said thoughtfully, “if we lock up the things you need to work on the garden during the night? Put them in my room, or something? I’m a light sleeper, so...we could stop stuff like that before it begins.”

Stuff like that.

Techno knew what he was talking about. It didn’t take a genius to figure it out.

He grimaced and sighed, looking down at himself- shirtless, bandaged shoulder and arm, a soft towel wrapped around his shoulders. Phil awkwardly gave a pat to his other shoulder.

No, he nearly said, I’d kill you before you ever got the chance to stop me from picking up my tools- and then the more rational part of his brain said hello, hello, that sounds like a good thing to do, Phil’s idea is great, he’d actually stop anything from happening, good- and Techno gave a hesitant, minute nod.

“Good. Good, good, good.” He paused. “Now, I...have you been, just...spacing out? Is something going on in that brain of yours? You act...*different*, sometimes, and usually it’s when you’re left alone for a long time or just not...paying attention. It’s not bad, I don’t think. But you look unsettled afterwards.” A wince. “You look unsettled *now*.”

He nodded again, this time more confidently. Phil grimaced.

“I know you like your alone time, but...I’ll make sure one of us checks on you often. Not bothering you, just...checking up on you so you don’t farm yourself into an early grave.”

Techno closed his eyes again.

“What was that just now, by the way? You just...blanked out after you stopped panicking. Tommy was so *scared*, Techno. I made sure he went to go do something- check on those bees he found the other day, he says he’s picked up some tricks on taking care of them by his friend- but he’s worried. I’m worried. We’re *all* worried,” he finally amended. “Just...you didn’t acknowledge us, really, didn’t push us away to focus on your task, you know? You just. Let yourself get pushed around this time and kept going.”

Silence. Phil wrapped an arm around him. They sat there for a minute, two, three.

“Rememberin’”, he muttered into the quiet.

“Huh?”

Techno waved an arm vaguely. “Happened when I was...fightin’ those spiders that time, although my body...” He hummed. “Muscle memory. Remembering some stuff better than just...vague recollections.”

“Oh. Oh. So what-”

“I was small enough to sit inside the wardrobe comfortably after you found me,” he said with a wry undertone. Phil’s arm tightened the slightest fraction around his shoulders. “Don’t really...understand it. Just bits ‘n pieces. Training Tommy, once.” He sighed. “Tell ya’...later.”

“You hid in that wardrobe a lot,” Phil said, and it was almost as if they were back to those days where Phil kept telling Techno about everything he had done, almost like when he had stretched Techno thin and kept him teetering on the edge of blowing up. This time- it helped. It was odd. “Wilbur was pushy, as a kid, even if he wasn’t as...ear-shattering as Tommy was. *Is.*”

That made Techno give a bit of a chuckle, and he could just *tell* that Phil was smiling text to him at the lightened mood. “That’s enough for you to get it, eh?” Phil nudged him. If he strained his hearing, he could hear Wilbur singing something soft. It was good. Nice. “He was still figuring out how to talk to you, how to treat you when you didn’t exactly get all of what he said...and kept saying he’d beat you in a fight.”

Hm. That sounded like a bad idea for Wilbur to have done. Even if Techno had been shorter than Wilbur then- which he was sure he was, considering he was still shorter now, only a few inches above a growing Tommy- if he had been as good at fighting from what Phil seemed to imply-

“You got him every time,” Phil said fondly. “*Hilarious* to watch.”

“I’m...sure.”

Techno let himself trail off to a soft sigh. The arm around him was warm- warm with body heat, warm with emotions, warm with *kindness*. If anyone tried to make him admit that he was melting at the half-hug, he’d have to kill them, but nobody was asking. Thankfully.

A growl rippled through the bathroom. It took Techno a second to realize that it was, in fact, his stomach.

“Come on,” Phil said, withdrawing his arm so that he could clap his hands together softly. “I think we all need some food. Let’s see what we have in the kitchen...”

If Techno had been allowed to sit there forever, for that snapshot in time in the timeless expanse of morning, he would have. Instead, he tilted his head back, let himself exhale through his nose, and let Phil pull him up by his good arm. The other burned.

No going at potato farming as intensely as he had done before, it seemed. His body seemed determined to snap himself out of any nice blankness with a wound that hissed at him like *that*.

He found himself grateful for it, for the bandages and Phil's panicked decision-making, even if his body, one scar richer, grumbled at him for it. He fished through his wardrobe for a simple top, pressed his nose into one to smell the lavender he and Phil had packed into little bags to scent the cloth, and breathed out slowly, ignoring any of the pain.

Maybe that scar, that reminder of the day, the shock to his system- maybe it would help him collect those lost pieces of himself.

Chapter End Notes

you know, this whole story was supposed to be a oneshot.

hope everyone's doing good!

viii. nobody fears the height; you all just fear the fall

Chapter Summary

When you've forgotten a good chunk of your life, true danger doesn't exactly register when you find it. Tommy worries about a friend. Techno looks at some scars.

(Or: No matter the world, its creatures slowly change, given enough time. It's not always common knowledge.)

Chapter Notes

[chapter title from "the crow" by dessa]

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“So, you know Tubbo, right?”

Techno, sprawled out across the couch, arm over his eyes, hummed vaguely at Tommy.

“So he’s in Dream’s server, the one we left, he’s- he’s... pretty worried about us. But he understood that it was a family thing, you know? Sure, he’s the only one to check up on Pogtopia, but it’s fine. He, uh...he keeps bees.”

Interesting.

Techno didn’t so much as move his arm off of his face. All he did was listen.

“And I’ve been messaging him, yeah, ever since I found a few bee nests around- the ones out back-”

Ah. He knew those. Friendly little things, although Phil had actually squawked when he encountered Techno examining them, bees crawling over him as if they thought he was a friend. Apparently Tommy had to wear some kind of outfit that he had thrown together of old clothes to interact with them? Silly.

Instead of talking about it and throwing him a tease that would feel awkward in his mouth, he just hummed again.

“It’s just helped a lot! But...he’s acting weird, Techno. He’s been acting weird ever since I left, and I just- I just don’t get it!” He could hear Tommy pacing, could imagine him running his hands through his hair, irritated beyond belief. “I’ve known him for a while, ever since

Phil let me out of his sight for once, before Dream's sever even started- but he's been acting weird."

How curious. Why was Tommy talking to him about it, exactly, and not Phil? Wilbur? Techno didn't even have the context about Tubbo from before he had gone off and promptly forgotten his whole life.

"Hey! You're just as good as them to talk about it to, and your fucking- amnesia- will go away at some point anyways and does it really matter?"

Ah. He had mumbled that out loud. At a loss, he hummed.

"You guys know all about- friendship and shit! How to talk to people."

What the actual fuck. He was the absolute worst candidate for Tommy to choose.

"So I don't know if his boss, Schlatt, is being weird or if he thinks we're keeping something from him that's more important than personal shit? I don't know if Tubbo fucking trusts me! And usually I know that he trusts me! He just...back in the server, when we had to leave to come here, he didn't...I...he didn't message me a lot. At first." For a moment, Tommy grew quiet, quiet. "How can I ask him what's going on? What do I say to him to- to make him trust me with that shit?"

"You don't," Techno said simply, letting himself relax further and melt into the couch. With both his cloak and a blanket thrown over him, even the chill from the weather coming inside didn't matter. "Don't say anything."

"But- what if he thinks it's *his* fault that I left? What if he thinks he's a bad friend and that I wanted to leave, or something? Does he think that *I'm* the bad friend for not telling him everything?"

"...Hm. Invite him here," he mused, "to look at the bees and...talk about bee things. Talk with him when he's here, or whatever. Friends do that, right? Help each other?"

A pause.

"But...this is our home? And, uh, he's probably busy with stuff back there?"

"...So?"

"So, he has all these duties under *Schlatt*," and wasn't *that* a word that curled around the back of his consciousness, whispering of all the things he didn't know and of all the things he would never understand. *Schlatt*. Such anger, such vehemence. "He's *busy*, but he keeps messaging me and being all *weird* about it, I just want to know what I need to *do*-"

"Why're you askin' *me*?"

"...Because you're my brother?"

Techno moved his arm. Opened one eye. Stared straight at him. “I don’t get what you’ve been sayin’. Don’t have context. Don’t remember *you* that well. Just. Tell him what you think of him or don’t say shit.” He sighed. “Ask Phil, not me.”

Tommy made a bit of a whine in the back of his throat. Techno closed his eye again and moved his arm back over, sighing. “But then Phil’ll-”

“I’ll what?”

Speak of the angel, and he shall appear.

“Tubbo’s acting weird even when I want advice for my bees and *I think something’s going on with him and-*”

“Talk to him,” Phil hummed. A few steps approached, and Techno heard the sound of Tommy groaning, of Phil laughing and probably ruffling his hair as he pulled him in for a hug.

“But- but- *Phil...*”

“Nope! Off you go. Stop bothering Techno about your friend and maybe go do something about it, eh? You know he’s never been the best at that stuff, even before, I don’t know why you’ve always gone to him first to ask about social interaction...”

“But-”

“Communicator out, go talk with him! If you want him to come over- I think I heard something like that- go and ask him over, I don’t mind, there you go...”

“He’s really worried about them,” Techno observed after Tommy had stormed out, muttering and probably squinting at his communicator. He remembered, faintly, how his own had to be broken, still, sitting in a sad pile on the desk he never used in his room. “It’s...hm.”

“Tubbo’s a good friend of his.” Phil sat down beside him, making the couch move a bit as Techno felt the cushions shift, felt Phil move his legs and place them over his lap. He opened his eyes to see Phil sprawled out on the other half of the couch almost like he was. “... Wilbur’s probably worried about *his* friends, too, but he’s a bit better on that. He actually messages people. About *feelings*.[”]

“Horrible.”

Techno found himself smirking as laughter rose up, his arms crossing behind his head as he kept his eyes open, gaze drifting to the ceiling.

...These people really were his family.

They were his *family*, and he’d let the memories keep welling up until he overflowed, until he knew exactly why Tommy’s worry seemed interesting, exactly why he found himself humming melodies from Wilbur that he couldn’t properly remember, exactly why he felt such a deep well of *calm* when he talked with Phil.

"I don't mind being around you all," he said thoughtfully, blunt and quiet- an *I love you* without the words clear in his tone- and jumped when Phil's arms wrapped around him, when the man's bright laughter turned into soft sniffling. "...Hey."

"Hey," Phil said, and Techno opened his eyes to see his smile, to see the true happiness on his face. "I love you too, you know that?"

"That's obvious." He sniffed. "*You're* the nerd who stays here all the time and apparently just waits for your brothers to visit."

"Techno-"

"Phil."

"Really!"

Everything was calmer now that they had...all settled whatever was going on days ago. Techno let life flow past, let himself remember. It was a bit of a difficult transition, though- Tommy and Wilbur couldn't always control what they said, and the presence of three other people than one seemed to make his brain try and scream and remember more all at once. Another instance of one step forward, two back, two more forwards. It was, at the very least, maddening.

They were always there when he was about to do something stupid, though- or when he lost himself to what was before.

He wanted so dearly to go back to the island, back to automatons and that harsh winter and the dumb, ratty cloak, even if he would surely freeze if he wasn't just...ignoring it. So often, he wanted to go back to that land of nothingness because it was *easy*. Fish for nothing, farm for potatoes, cook them unevenly over a fire. Here, there were fish, there were more crops, more mobs, more *words*.

There were *monsters*, even, and there was the biggest problem: his muscle memory of fighting back in high gear, enough for him to instinctively know what to do...and instinctively know that his body, unused to fighting as it had gotten over that muddy period of time, was far from being in proper fighting shape.

It frustrated him. It made him seethe silently, a weighted wooden sword in his hand as he practiced in his garden, slashing over and over again and doing it *well* but making mistakes. Mistakes, mistakes, *mistakes*: he knew they were happening, but didn't know what they were. Couldn't identify them.

Maybe it harmed him. Maybe it helped. He remembered flashes of training Tommy, bits and pieces of defending Phil's old home- their old home- but where did he even learn to fight to

begin with? Was he just training himself to become something that terrified the him of the present?

What was he like when he was younger, before he had been found? They couldn't help with that, couldn't even come *close* to discovering that shard of him, and as time passed, it felt more and more like *that* part of his life was what was holding him back from that technique, from feeling whole in that sliver of himself.

Techno didn't like fighting. Not *now*, at least- he could remember the adrenaline, the rush of blood, could get it all to come back without any of the memories attached- but his hands shook wildly when all was said in done, ready to throw up, and over the past days, weeks, he had found himself doing just that after going through the forest with Phil- or, more recently, Wilbur and Tommy.

He *refused* to talk about it with them. Sure, it made them upset but- he *couldn't*. Not when it clashed so much with the person they thought of him as. Not when, even with progress, that simple (*oh, oh, not simple at all, not at all*) part of him broke apart like the facts of his life that were integral to him were all just facades. No matter what he covered it up with, though, they were noticing, slowly but surely, that something was wrong.

Not *wrong* as in the episodes where he'd feel almost as if he were possessed by himself. Not *wrong* in the sense where he could get more and more annoyed at them and let himself snap and growl- but the kind of wrong that felt like a quiet, soft sort of devastation, an unstoppable force twining around his heart and holding it hostage.

It was a slow, creeping kind of horror. It was the kind that made him silently scream, the kind that got him to repeat a motion of a sword over and over until he felt sick, the kind that wormed its way into his dreams and claimed prime spot in his thoughts until he felt as if he could do anything to make it *stop*.

It was what kept him up at night. It was what had him raiding the cupboards for hot cocoa fixings- and lavender tea, after they ran out of cocoa powder- and it was what made him tightly at his unbound hair when he waited, tense and high-strung, for the microwave to finish its spinning. It was him deflecting questions, dancing around topics, fishing for a full day and refusing to leave for meals, not possessed by apathy but consumed by a dawning uneasiness.

He noticed their stares. How could he not? He noticed the glances between Wilbur and Phil, the looks that Tommy shot him before he seemed more focused than ever on his communicator. He stewed over it, the emotions and the memories that conflicted with what he wanted, and wondered if his half-hearted resolve to remember it all was truly worth it.

Sure, he had thought it before, had gone back and forth on whether this was what he wanted, to destroy the boundary between what *was* and what *is*- but it was a serious kind of pondering, now, the kind where he only half paid attention when fighting the latest batch of monsters or herding some animals back into the pens that Phil kept, the kind that had him making stupid, *stupid* mistakes.

The Blade never dies, he thought to himself one evening, stumbling back in with a lethargy born of spider poison, and laughed. It wasn't deranged, not unhinged, but desperate, horrified at whatever had become of him before.

He tended to the wound himself, a practiced hand wrapping bandages around the forearm that had been bitten. It was good, to take this time to himself, to hide away in the bathroom-turned-first-aid-area, to check on himself as the other three did different things- all outside, about to come in to clean themselves up and sleep. It was a chance to breathe that he gladly took. His shoulder flared as he considered the spider bite- nasty, but the poison felt like it would wear off, fading as the wound that Phil had given him hummed a high note.

It wasn't as bad as a healing wound. It was fine.

The bandages on that were gone, Phil-approved, but it wasn't as if Techno could- or *would*- just tell him that it kept hurting. There was no real reason to do that, not when it wouldn't affect anything, not when all the scars he had before murmured their discontent at this, at that. A stab wound he had no recollection of moaned when he stretched, his knee ached just like it had on the island, and...well.

These were almost all from fighting, right? Monsters, other people- himself?

No, not himself, unless it was from him being dumb and tripping and cutting himself open on a rock or the sharp edge of a countertop.

But these scars were all from his past. All but the shoulder from Phil, all but the spider bite that he considered in the pale light of the bathroom and covered up with slow, routine movements.

He considered himself and felt something rise up from the deep, something that made his lip curl and shoulders set. He hadn't asked for this body, but it was the one he had gotten, and if he wanted to cover it all up, longsleeved shirts and simple gloves and a vibrant red cloak, he could do that. It seemed to be what he had gone with before, so it left him elated.

But what were the stories behind those scars? Why had he been fighting? Had he been the terrifying thing that had appeared on the night with the spiders, or whatever had attacked Tommy?

Why did people even fight?

(Why had a child known fighting with such intimacy that it became the core of what they were?)

Why had *he* fought?

...It was clear he wouldn't find that lovely part of his life out anytime soon, even if he wanted to know. He made sure the bandaging was secure, pulled back on a clean shirt, sprawled across his bed in the other room, and promptly passed out- exhausted and ignoring the way that his body grumbled.

There was time.

(Was there time?)

There was always time.

Techno woke in the dead of night, eyes open to stare at the ceiling. Techno rolled his eyes and stumbled out of bed, paying no mind to the small commotion he was making. It'd be fine-he'd just go get a cup of warm milk or something, put some honey in it, and go back to sleep after he was done. Simpler than hot cocoa, simpler than tea. Good and simple.

Collapsing in the middle of the hallway, loud enough to wake anyone not in a deep sleep, was *not* part of the plan.

Fuck, he thought, hands bringing themselves up to cup at his face. Gods, he hadn't braced himself properly, was that blood on his face? He scrunched up his face and groaned at the way that it screamed back at him. Something was. Maybe broken. Was his nose all bloody?

He extended a hand and groaned, put it on the floor, and tried to pick himself up before anyone came running.

"What the *hell*, Techno?"

"Not you, kid," he rasped, shakily standing up and almost falling over not half a second later, if it wasn't for the child that slipped under his arm. "Get- get offa' me, you brat--"

"You fucking *fell* in the *middle of the night*--"

"Techno?"

Phil looked at him blearily after his door opened, Wilbur peering down the hall from his own room a second later, and if Techno was thinking a bit more clearly, he would have recognized when Phil's mind shifted from "*loud noise, investigate, fuck, I'm tired*" to "*Techno's hurt, mother bear mode is a go*". His eyes brightened, alarmed and turning to Tommy for explanation, and Techno hissed as Tommy stumbled through a very lacking explanation.

"Just wanna' drink," he said, and valiantly turned to step forwards towards the kitchen, stumbling and clinging onto Tommy for dear life. His heart beat out of time, fast as a rabbit, leaving him panting and panicked as the other three grew more alarmed. "Just some- some milk 'n hon- honey..."

"This isn't from memories," Phil seemed to murmur to himself before he took Techno from Tommy, steering him right around and back over to Techno's room a few steps away. He complained and fought ineffectively at Phil's handling, but there was no fighting Phil when

he was worried and was on a mission. “You went out in the early evening, right? What happened?”

“Mm....” He snorted and shook his head. “Monsters. Y’know.”

“I don’t know,” Phil said tersely, sitting him down in a chair and examining him. “Sweating, delirious, loss of balance...” He paled. “Did you get hurt at all when we were out there, Techno?”

“I never get hurt,” he sniffed, crossing his arms and tossing his head back- and accidentally bashed it against the back of the chair. “Fuck- uh- that hurt. No. No, it didn’t. Didn’t hurt.”

“I forgot how much of a shit he is when he’s out of it,” Wilbur mused from the doorway. Techno found his gaze and lazily flipped him off. “Damn, you don’t have to do that. You’re such a rude, *rude* little boy.”

“Not little,” he grunted-

“Arm, *now*,” Phil ordered tersely, and he whined as the man took the arm that flipped Wilbur off and pushed back the sleeve. “Bandages on it- Wil, go get the kit from the bathroom, okay? You know where it is- on the right, bottom shelf, white box-”

“Got it, got it, back in a second-”

Phil got to work. Even with Techno’s complaining and bitching and moving around whenever he felt so much as a hint of pain, he was able to get the bandages off before Wilbur came back. By that point, Techno just laid back and grumbled unintelligibly, hands shaking, shaking, *shaking* as he sat there. He had tried to get up, but- well- it was no use with Phil there and Tommy hovering nearby.

“Turn on the light, please,” Phil murmured as Wilbur got back, and Techno flinched when the light got turned on, spasming a bit and closing his eyes. “There we go- just- oh, fuck.”

“What is it?” Tommy’s voice was quiet from where he had been on Techno’s bed, and Techno thought that, just maybe, Tommy was staring and clasping his hands together, worried beyond belief.

Silly, he thought to himself, and went back to hissing at Wilbur to turn the lights back off.

“One of the bad venomous varieties got him,” Phil announced, and the room got thrown into pandemonium for a second before he turned to stare at them all. “No. Either watch or go. Wilbur, wet this with warm water, get some soap on it, come back. Techno, does it hurt?”

Come to think of it, if Techno focused past a pounding head, the light on his eyes, and the way that his shoulder was acting up- “Like a bitch,” he confirmed, and now that he had focused on the pain he couldn’t focus on anything but it. He didn’t scream, didn’t hiss any more, but he shook and clenched his fists, trying to not let it get to him. He couldn’t let it get to him. *Shit*.

"Arm up on the desk," Phil ordered, and Techno nearly pulled his arm back when Phil elevated it to where it had to be. "Wilbur- you're back, thank you, stay here- alright...fuck."

"How bad is it." Wilbur's voice was flat. It was *unnatural*, he thought, but he couldn't quite comment on it with how much he had to deal with. He didn't want to fucking- *deal with this*- but there he was, head screaming and arm howling and his whole body complaining one way or the other. It was enough to make him feel sick. He *did* feel sick.

"I can take care of it," Phil murmured, and Techno couldn't help but give a trembling, pained smile.

Huh, this reminded him of something-

Chapter End Notes

i am...very tired. family tires me, work tires me, life tires me.

i hope this work is a little balm for anyone who's as tired as i am, eh?

ix. two-toned echoes tumbling through time

Chapter Summary

There are parts of one's life that nobody else knows, and never will know. Techno remembers skies that are more natural than the overworld. The others are mostly just panicking.

(Or: Memories returned from a spider's bite have a red overlay, which is honestly weird, because the world he knows isn't, uh. Red. And full of lava.)

Chapter Notes

[chapter title from multiple songs in the soundtrack for ffxiv's shadowbringers expansion, the most notable song being "shadowbringers"]

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The sky was a wash of crimson and lavender, bleeding into each other almost as if they were opposing ocean waves. Techno clung to the sight, drinking it all in even as he lurched forwards, even as he kept himself going through his panic.

He didn't know exactly where he was, but these people weren't his, these people that looked similar yet so different to his mother so many miles away where she had raised him. They had proper tusks and mottled skin and sharp eyes so similar to hers, but their eyes saw him and thought *prey*, thought *food*.

They talked among themselves, they traded, they had society, sure- but as soon as they locked their eyes on him they were gone to some kind of madness.

There had been nothing before this. Darkness, raised in the quiet, a shadowed parent with eyes of ruby and clawed hands, but they had been gone for so, so long. The world around his little cave of a home could only sustain him for so long.

He had grown hungry. He had ventured out and forged a sword of red stone to gather food.

Years later, he still survived this way, under this bleeding sky crowned by rocks, the only difference the discovery of society and the new ways he found to use that to survive.

The heat weighed on him, slowing his careful, sluggish movements. A hand pressed to his belly, the other to the wall of nether-rock that he stuck close to, Techno kept a close eye on

the people nearest him. Their ears twitched when something screamed far away, but his own movements weren't noticed at all. He could only hope that those in this area didn't have a good sense of smell, or his blood would be more than enough to get him killed.

One step more. *One step more.*

Every look at them reminded him of how different he was, how unnatural he looked- some of his teeth were a mimicry of their sharpened teeth and two tusks, sure, but their ends were by far blunter and harder to chew with, making his efforts to steal ineffective if he got some of their more preferred foods. His ears were rounder, even if they came to a point, not able to hear as clearly as they could, unable to distinguish the finer points of their harsh-to-soft accents, so similar yet so different from the tongue his mother taught him.

He was inferior in every way possible except- perhaps- the fact that he could claw out a living from the barest of things, could make his own sword of red rock and dark sticks and hone it until it could be even faster than their golden blades. He could utter a few words in a language that none of them understood, the smoother words clumsy on his tongue, and baffle them for a second or two.

That was how his world worked- be better, be faster, be stronger than them and you could live. Nearly dying was just part of the deal.

Didn't mean that a sword in the gut didn't keep him off of his feet once he got to a safe place for a good few days, though, until his food stores ran out and he had to go get more.

(The smaller ones played in their little villages, jokingly pushed each other near lava and giggled when one almost fell in. How could they be so...naive? Even at their same size, he felt more like the tall ones, the ones that watched their backs and fought each other and won and climbed to the top of their pecking order.

He wondered if it was the influence of the father he never knew, the one his mother had never mentioned before her absence.)

Red bled into lavender. Lavender bled into sickly blue and right back into crimson.

Everything hurt.

“Stop fucking trying to move!”

“Head- hurts- *fuck*”

“Painkillers, *now*. Techno, drink this. Do you know what kind of spider that was-”

“It hurts,” he breathed, and Phil cursed.

"Why did you have to go out- alone, mind you, we were all on the other side of the forest- and do *that*?"

"Hmm...did it before? Maybe?"

Poison wasn't anything new for someone who had spent his life fighting, right? It seemed like something pre-potato Techno would do-

He was cornered.

Techno hadn't thought it could get any worse, but as he stared down at the group of pig-people, sword clutched in his hands (so still, oh-so-still, he couldn't afford to die here and hesitation would be death), he marveled at it all. Watched how the biggest and strongest of this village barked at each other in the harsh tongue that Techno knew like the back of his hand, their peculiar regional accent one that he had only grown to fully understand through his years of watching and stealing.

They would kill him, yes, but they wanted to make him as scared as they could get him before they tried to end it all.

To be honest, that was doing a pretty good job of scaring him all on its own. Who did that?

...These people did.

"He's small," they said to each other, glancing at him while others of their party brandished their axes and swords. "Look at it! Is he the one that's been stealing from us? The one who our children have spotted in the past cycle? Thief!"

"Thief," those around them murmured, and it seemed to rile them up even more, their sharp teeth ready to tear him apart, their body language tense and angry. Techno refused to let his hands so much as twitch, and looked around for exits.

Sure, he was good at fighting, but only enough to fend off two, maybe three of these people at once- and even then, that was sketchy with the fact that he was as small as most of their children. He had to escape by some kind of trickery or... or...

There. If he could just make it over there, to that side of the group, there was a gap that was small enough that only their young could go through, and he could either hide in there, follow where it went, or break through to somewhere that would prove his escape.

He just had to have an opening for his shuddering heart to kickstart and push him through.

"Is it not even scared of us? It's so tiny, look at it! But it's hurt some of us before, just look at that sword, that shouldn't even be possible-"

Techno struck, lunging forward from his perch to slash at the faces of those who had been slowly creeping up upon him. In the chaos, he slipped by one, two, ignored the commotion as they all started yelling- and let out a yelp of his own when one got him on the back of his leg, another taking a shallow cut on his side with their gilded swords.

Fuck, fuck, *fuck*, he wouldn't be able to make it, would he? But it was so close, fuck, *there-*

Their angry screams echoed in the small alcove as they found themselves unable to follow the very, very clear blood trail, and Techno hurried as well as his traitorously hurt body would allow along the tunnel. They'd be back, either with their children or with knowledge of where the tunnel went, and he had to be far, *far* gone before they had either of those.

The tunnel opened up into a small cave, washed in a mix of violet and white, and he stared with wide eyes at the...*thing* that stood centerpiece in the cave, at the other tunnel that went out the opposite end, sized for someone nearly as tall as the adults.

What *was* that thing? Bordered in dark stone almost like the rocks that wept violet, it was the source of the only light in the cave- pale and purple. He stuck a hand in it, momentarily ignoring the pain that cut across his body, that made him stumble and bleed and stain the rock he was now standing on and tumble forwards-

And then he was somewhere *else*, a ground of green and a sky of milky blue and with nothing hanging above. He was somewhere else, with strange brown trees around him with *green leaves* and *desaturated mushrooms*, and it was enough of an anomaly to Techno that he...froze.

Where had he *gone*? Had stepping into the light created by...*whatever* that rocky thing was brought him here?

He looked back. The same portal as in the cave sat there, patiently waiting for another poor soul to step through and possibly return back to the caves of the Nether.

Techno considered the situation, the blood he kept leaving on the ground, the fact that he had no food, the fact that...everything was so strange.

Maybe, he thought, *It's better off to stay here for a bit and see if there's better food. Steal from people if I find them and do it better than before. Survive. Make sure I'm not caught like before, I can't let myself get caught, I'll die, I'll die, I'll die.*

That sounded like a plan, but it was perhaps better to work on stopping the blood from his wounds before something very bad happened.

Yeah, *that* was his first priority. He stood up-

“He’s asleep, right? Right?”

“Yes, Tommy. For the last time, he’s asleep.”

“What the hell do we *do* with him?”

A pause. A sigh.

“Tommy, we just have to keep an eye on him. I’ll make sure nothing happens. I just count it lucky that I had some extra potions- that’ll counteract the worst of it until it starts to lessen. But...I don’t think you meant his health.”

“How do we fucking...stop him from doing that shit again, Phil? Is he going to ignore being poisoned *again*? ”

“We keep an eye on him, like I said. Wilbur knows this. He got into all sorts of dangerous shit before we picked you up, and even after- you just barely noticed. Sit with him, okay? Talk with him. While he’s in bed, don’t let him get up unless he needs to go to the bathroom. We’ll all take turns but being alone isn’t good for anyone. Remember when you were real sick before?”

“...Yeah. And Techno was with me almost the whole time.”

“That’s right. Just...be patient. He’s not the best at bedrest, just like you.”

“Hey!”

“Hmnn...”

“Techno?”

Techno opened his eyes blearily before he closed them again, mind more on skies of red that washed into pale colors than the conversation that had happened as he woke. He flexed his free hand, the one that wasn’t elevated and wrapped in a towel, and thought about the heavy weight of a red-rock sword.

He thought about a language that was filtering back to him. One that felt true, that felt right, better for his tongue than the awkward syllables he forced out every day.

“*I think I remembered something,*” he mumbled thoughtfully, and let his eyes drift over to the other two...who looked hopelessly confused at his words. To his interest, Phil only seemed confused for a second before something clicked and he groaned.

“Go sleep, Tommy,” he ordered, and waved off the boy despite his arguments. Now that Techno was looking, even through his own sleepiness and pain and memories, Phil looked like everything had been taken out of him. Like he was only a faintly smiling body, barely awake. “Something happen while you were out, Techno? Remember a language?”

“*Not really,*” he mused, still in that half-cognizance. Muscle memory, but for the mind... Mind memory? No. More like muscle memory for his language skills. That was better. More accurate. “*Remember red sky, though.*”

"If only I hadn't forgotten what I learned when I found you," he sighed, and shook his head.
"...Go back to sleep, Techno. You got bit real bad by one of the worst spiders in this world. Just your luck, huh...I hadn't realized you'd forget what that kind of danger looks like, you know? It was pretty rare around before you left, but their population's grown a little..."

The two of them seemed to both pause at the same time before, a second later, Phil chuckled.
"Just sleep. You'll have plenty of time to remember things in bedrest, especially once we all wake up and enforce it. Just know that if you get up, you're going to hurt yourself. You don't want to do that, I assure you."

Techno hummed idly, rolled his eyes, and closed them again. It wasn't as if Phil was *wrong*, but still. That was fine. Sleep was good, anyways, for his exhausted brain. Not everything was really connecting. Spiders? Didn't they just spin webs? Seemed silly that he'd get seriously hurt by one.

He fell asleep to the soft sound of a drizzle starting outside and his own soft breaths.

What were these creatures? They looked so similar to the people back in his world, so similar to the animals that they herded and hunted, but this one was...soft. It didn't have proper tusks, didn't have angry eyes. It was pink like his hair, milling about with an unassuming nature, and Techno tilted his head as he examined it.

He considered his red sword. Looked back up at...the thing.

Was it even good for food, or was it an ambush predator in hiding?

...He didn't want to find out. Techno let it be and went on with his day, investigating where he had been put, the strange trees and ground and sky all around him.

This was not home. This could *never* be a home, not like his shitty little hideouts were back in the other world, hot and oppressive and cramped.

...At least the mushrooms he picked along his way tasted good.

"Why'd you stay there?"

Techno tilted his head from where he laid to look at Wilbur, who sat on the only other chair in the room with a small frown. He held a guitar in his hands and plucked at the strings idly, looking towards the wall and not at Techno. They hadn't spoken much for the last hour and a half except for when he was given some tea.

“...What?” Techno kept his eyes on Wilbur and offered a small raise of his eyebrows- even though it wasn’t seen.

“Why’d you stay on that island after you won?” An idle few chords were brought out, but they seemed to dissolve into nothing as his hands stilled. “Do you know why you stayed and kept farming and...and got trapped?”

Oh. This was something Techno knew, even though it was fuzzy on the exact details. He licked his lips, found them dry, and let the silence sit for a long moment. Wilbur seemed content enough to let him find his words. That was good.

Hum. Why, exactly, had he done that?

“I think,” he said slowly, letting himself linger on each word as if savoring the taste of every one, “I just...liked farming. And that was...mostly what I had been doing in those months, when I wasn’t...checking on what Squid was doing and...sabotaging. It was calming.” A pause. “Quiet.”

“Go straight from something more like an actual war and into a potato war,” Wilbur murmured, and Techno could see the smallest hint of a smile on his face. “And then end up liking potatoes too much to go away instantly. Huh.”

“If only I remembered more before then,” he said dryly back. “It’d be nice if I could know why it was so refreshing besides...the fact that I wasn’t constantly fighting.”

“A big part of the server you were in- and even the subserver within that- is based on fighting, Techno.”

“...So?”

Wilbur let out a bark of laughter, something half-bitter and half-hysterical. Techno sighed and looked away. “So? You went straight to one of the non-fighting things, which- was so weird! I still don’t entirely get why you did that whole war in the first place! Maybe if you hadn’t...”

It didn’t take a genius to know what Wilbur had been going to say before he trailed off. “I had to beat a nerd in the amount of potatoes farmed,” he said, “and... I think, before I even thought of that, I had to get...books to upgrade items. Which I had to farm potatoes for. And then I ended up liking it. And I optimized it. And then I made my fields.”

“You go all in on whatever you do.”

“...Sounds like it.”

Wilbur gave another simple strum of the guitar. “Want to hear more of what I’ve been working on, Techno? I think I’m finished with one of the songs, just maybe-”

“Sure.”

When he looked back to him in the middle of the song, Wilbur’s eyes were closed, and he looked- happy. A bittersweet kind of happy, perhaps, but happy.

It made something in Techno feel warm, made him feel like a little ember in a fire instead of a piece of coal in the middle of snow.

“Tell me why you started...music,” he murmured after Wilbur fell silent, Techno putting his free arm over his eyes. The other shifted a bit, but at his body’s own complaints, he stopped.

“Well- it was before Phil came back with you, and to be honest, it sort of started before I even met Phil, but...”

“*Your music sounds like shit,*” Techno yelled over the sound of Wilbur singing his heart out, his own voice carrying to where Wilbur sat. He only got a glare from the kid- they hadn’t understood what he said in his harsh syllables, unable to get words out in their smooth tongue, but obviously got that it wasn’t meant in kindness. Techno huffed from where he was perched and sharpening his red-rock- *netherrock*, as the person named *Phil* had called it- sword, glaring across the way at him.

Wilbur kept belting out his song. Techno sharpened his sword with a bit more annoyance, a bit more anger.

Gods, he was so annoying. The songs, as far as he could tell, were all about intangible things and meaningless items and events that he didn’t understand- and, he bet, Wibur didn’t understand either. They were *pretentious* and they were *horrible* and, worst of all, they were *useless*. What good was a song against a monster? Against a person? Against the people Techno had gone all his life avoiding, until he had stepped through that portal and appeared in this part of the world with its undescribable sky?

He could barely hold his own against Techno when he was exhausted and not looking for a fight. How could he possibly have gone this long without being killed by the many monsters Phil had shown him crept around in the night?

All he did was sit there and look pretty and talk. Talk, talk, *talk*.

“Hey, Techno! Listen to *this*, it’s great for you-”

Oh, *that* did it- an insult *and* mangling of his name to fit the human’s language. Techno tightened his grip on his sword and set his whetstone down, jumped off of his perch (sure, it was a ‘fence’, whatever *that* word meant, but ‘perch’ described it perfectly in his mind) and walked over to where Wilbur’s back was to him. The older kid kept strumming, kept singing- and, if he tried to pay attention to the meaning of the words, the patterns that Phil had slowly been teaching him, recognized that it was about a *monster*.

It’s great for you-

He dropped the sword and went straight for a punch, catching Wilbur in the jaw when he turned to look, hearing his heavy footsteps.

“Hey- what the fuck, Techno! I-”

He swung again, and Wilbur fell back, one hand clutching his jaw and the other making sure his guitar was safe, set to the side. Why did he care so much about it? Why did he care more about that wood than the fact that he had been punched? Oh, how it made him so *angry*, so *furious*.

“*A joke!* It was just a *joke!*”

Joke. Just another unrecognizable syllable.

Techno saw red. Another step forwards-

“I wasn’t all that great, at first, but what kids are, you know?” Techno could just feel the way Wilbur’s eyes crinkled as he picked at the guitar. “You sure didn’t like my totally great, cool songs and skills after Phil brought you home, little half-piglin thing that you were. Are.”

“It was all about dumb shit like monsters and sad feelings,” he muttered rather bitterly, and then froze. It was a second later that he lifted his arm off of his head to stare, eyebrows furrowed, at the ceiling- and then at Wilbur, who was staring at him with wide eyes and a devilish grin.

“You fucker- you understood half of that shit, didn’t you, god, you deserved all of my shittalking, you acted dumb on me!”

“Deception is a part of life,” Techno intoned, and couldn’t help but feel that happy little spark deep in his bones light up- it hadn’t been a response out of instinct. It was a response from something *clicking* deep inside of him. His voice was flat, but there was no stopping the almost goofy grin on his face as he and Wilbur stared at each other. “And either way- talk shit, get hit.”

Wilbur slapped his arm lightly before falling into laughter, leaning back in the chair fast enough that he was barely able to stop himself from falling. That got a snort out of him, and then Wilbur was back to the guitar, giving it more energy and watching Techno with a look that said *hey, just wait for this cool, funny bit.*

“Just for that-”

He went into a rendition of a song that Techno actually *remembered*, albeit only partly, one that gave him some kind of a horrible cross between an endlessly amused grin and a terrifying scowl. The war on his face made Wilbur break into giggles whenever he wasn’t playing, but it ended with that feeling in his chest warming his whole body.

"I hate you, Wilbur," he said after it was all said and done, but there was no wiping away his dumb smile. All Wilbur did back was cackle, rude and horrible and so like the recollections in his mind of his older brother that he almost couldn't handle it. "You're horrible."

"You love me," he responded, full of sing-song and banter. Techno ineffectively waved his free arm at him. "You do, you do, you *do!*!"

"I banish you from my realm. Tell Phil that you've been banished forever."

"I don't think so!"

Wilbur's light laughter was one of the sweetest songs Techno had ever heard.

Chapter End Notes

i got coconut wafer snacks from the asian market today. they're from italy. these little bitches taste so good im not even kidding

also my workplace got broken into the other night but the robbers couldnt steal anything bc they couldnt open up the back of their van KEKWWWW

hope everyone's doing good! if not, here's me givin you a little hug and some words! go conquer tomorrow and feel better than you did today!

x. i'll always be negotiating with the truth

Chapter Summary

Milk with honey is the new hot commodity in their little world. Tommy's pretty bad at concealing his worry. Techno's scars are still a topic of deep internal thought.

(Or: Will he ever stop wondering about who he used to be? Will he ever end up liking what he digs up from the deep?)

Chapter Notes

[chapter title from "compulsive liar" by ezra furman]

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

"I've done good with it, yeah? There's nothing wrong with the honey, or anything?"

Techno considered his warm mug of milk and looked back to where Tommy hovered and flitted around him, sitting up in his bed and trying to ignore the way that the spider bite hissed and screamed and pulsed under the bandages. The kid looked excited and horrified of possible failure in turns, and he couldn't help but quirk a tired little smile at it, couldn't help but raise an eyebrow. That only got him *more* fidgety.

"Tommy..."

"I'm gonna kill Tubbo, he *totally* lied to me when he came over about the honey those bees'd make-"

Ah, that must have been the shock of dark hair that he had seen out the window running around with Tommy a few days ago, before the whole spider bite had gone down and Phil swooped down on him like a hyper-parental hawk. He hadn't talked with the other boy- he was pretty sure they barely even knew about him- but Tommy had seemed happy. Had brightened up a little after Tubbo came and went, like something was off of his shoulders.

"-and he said the bees were fine and happy, you know? Said they liked me, but maybe that's just because he wanted me to *fail*, that *bastard*—"

"It's good, Tommy," he slid in, taking a long sip of the eveningtime drink while Tommy rambled on...and then stopped, his mile-a-minute brain finally processing what he had said.

It didn't even take a second for him to light up again, his fire rekindled, and Techno hid a smile behind drinking as Tommy started to rant about how Techno had led him on, how he was such a *dick*, such a *horrible brother*. He went on in that manner a lot, Techno had learned- but it was easy to tune out and count as background noise. To be honest, though, there was still such amusement to be gained from just listening. It was almost like a one-man comedy routine.

"You absolute- how *dare* you- I nearly slandered Tubbo, you prick, I can't believe you would make me do that! That's some of the best honey this side of the whole universe, I'll have you know, no matter what world you go to, just know that'd cost you all of your diamonds and a whole arm on Hypixel-"

"Bartering on...on a server like that." Techno snorted. Tommy flipped him off.

"You know what I mean! Now drink that or so the gods help you I'll make you drown in honey!"

"So scary."

"I'll show you scary!"

"Mmm. *Sure*."

He took a long, slow sip of the honeyed milk and let himself drift. Even with Tommy, the yammering on became a bit rote after some time.

"So, I was thinking," Tommy said out loud, thoughtfulness layered over his ear-piercing voice, "that-"

"Thinkin's dangerous, for you. You know that, right?"

Tommy shot a venomous glare in his direction. Techno hid his smile and drew his bow back up, peering down his makeshift range to his target in the distance. Hmm. He had to start thinking about what improvements could be made to this bow- it just wasn't accurate enough. It drew as smoothly as butter, as fast as he could dream for, but it just lost all that benefit when you couldn't hit what you were going for.

"So I was thinking," he emphasized, a sneer clear as day in his voice, "that it would be good for you if I went with you when you left to, like, kill monsters and shit! And go visit other worlds! Like Hypixel! You're always there, you're barely ever here-"

"What makes you think that." He selected an arrow and examined it. Strung it up, quick as a flash to draw- and lowered it with a dissatisfied frown. Selected another arrow, the weight of choice dancing upon his palms.

“Well, I can’t get better if I just do all those stupid stances you and Phil make me do! And Wil just laughs at me when I want to practice with him? Experience- yes, experience- is the best teacher for someone like me! And Hypixel’s all *about* fighting shit!”

He reserved the incredulous look that he would normally give in favor of examining the second arrow he picked up with greater scrutiny. Did he have to make a whole other set of arrows as well? Fuck. Perhaps someone had been practicing with this set when he was away, because things were just *wrong*.

“Phil said you were practically fighting as soon as he *met* you, and you were younger than I was when you were found, right? How old *were* you?”

“Old enough to be smart about when I fight,” he said, dry as a bone. “Unlike *you*.”

“Hey!” Surprisingly, he seemed to cool himself off before talking again instead of just... going off on him. “I just... It doesn’t feel like I’m getting any *better*, Techno! Come on, just let me tag along, I’ll just watch, I *swear*-”

“If you come along, you’ll try to fight everyone you see- or *everything*, if it’s just the forest- and then claim they attacked first.”

“...No, I won’t.”

He drew the arrow and let it loose, watching carefully as it embedded itself on the target- a solid foot to the side of where he had aimed for. He had taken wind into account, come *on*. “Yes, you will,” he sighed, and lowered the bow so that he could sit down on a tree stump he had put by his little range for such an occasion- examining the rest of his quiver. “Going through what you already know *matters*, Tommy. Experience... It’s good, but it’s dangerous as hell.”

He certainly had the scars to prove it, both concealed by his long clothing and not.

“I swear- I’ll tell Phil that you’ve been going out more times at night just to fight monsters than he *told* you to,” Tommy said with a sniff, crossing his arms and posturing like he had just done something amazing. “I *know* you’ve been sneaking out, you know! You’re not exactly the most *secret*.”

...Tommy had him there. If Phil found out, he’d give Techno the *Look*, and then he’d crumble under the pressure that Phil put him in until he was nothing but a miserable little speck of dust with only his clothes to mark that he had once been there.

How the hell had Tommy found out?

“When I can’t sleep, I look out the window,” Tommy said after a moment, grinning. Ah. He had spoken out loud. “So easy to see you going out- or coming back half covered in monster guts. It’s hilarious to hear you try and clean yourself up without waking Phil, you know.”

“Whatever,” he said, waving a hand at the kid and ignoring the way he *brightened*. “You can come with me when I head back to Hypixel, okay? That way there’s no pressure. If

something bad happens I can send you right on back here. And I *will*. It's a promise, nerd."

Sure, he'd come back if he died in Hypixel's respawnable servers, but maybe that feeling of death would scare him enough that he wouldn't try such reckless stunts elsewhere. Coming back was a *privilege*, only granted if the creators of a server had enough know-how and sheer power to hold that enchantment over their world- and an ability from admins coveted beyond belief. Their world didn't have it- if Phil were to see Techno bringing back Tommy's body from dying here, he'd be dead and *stay* that way.

Better that Tommy get scared into behaving than for him to see- to see-

"Do you remember," he said in the middle of Tommy's rant, "when you blackmailed me into bringing you along to...to, ah, Hypixel? That server?" Beyond faint recollections, beyond something that coated his tongue with caution, he remembered white halls, bare feet, being overwhelmed. *Where he had been trapped.*

Tommy peered down at him from where he stood, clearly suspicious. "I've done that, like, a billion times."

Somehow, he wasn't surprised. "The first time."

"Oh- the first time! Man, I can *totally* feel Phil's disappointment at me from back then," Tommy groaned, dramatically throwing himself back onto Techno's bed and making it wobble. He bit back a hiss as it jostled his arm, jostled the other one holding his mug- but everything was fine. Nothing spilled. It just *hurt* to hell and back.

"All 'Oh, Tommy, how dare you pressure Techno into that, you know how it affects him' and 'You could have died if Techno had chosen to take you to the wilderness instead' and not 'Wow, you did so good there, Tommy! You lasted so long in those cool, cool battles'!"

Huh.

"If I recall correctly," Techno said, closing his eyes and trying to fish for the tail end of that memory, "You got taken out about two minutes in. You didn't even defend your base."

"I so *did*," Tommy retorted, tossing his head as if that actually did anything from where he laid. "You're just jealous about how good I did. Chasing after your dumb winstreak."

"You were the first one out."

"No I wasn't!"

"...My memory's pretty bad, sure, but I think I remember you wiping out like a total dork."

"You're a dork."

“You really wanna test me?” When Tommy looked at him, Techno drained the rest of his mug, set it on his bedside table, and arched his eyebrows dramatically at Tommy until he relented and huffed, shaking his head. “Thought so. I could kick your ass while like this.” He waved his hurt arm and stayed strong as it howled with renewed determination, the only sign of his pain the spasming of his hand. He put it back down before Tommy could worry.

(Would he even worry, if he noticed it?)

“Hey-”

“No actual fighting,” Phil’s voice called out sharply as he passed by the room. Tommy went from a raging brat to a wilted husk of a person, dramatically twisting and bending and ended up all over Techno’s legs.

“Such a buzzkill,” Tommy muttered.

“Gotta agree with you there. Woulda’ been funny to deck you like this.”

“...Ugh. You’re the *worst*.”

“Hm.”

“It should be good enough to get moving without you feeling dizzy in...hmm...”

Phil held Techno’s arm in his lap, the two both sitting on his bed with the medical kit to Phil’s far side. He turned the arm back and forth, giving the two of them a good view of the nasty-looking wound that the spider bite had become.

How the hell could a spider bite become such a *bitch*? How could it look like anything but a spider bite except for the circular forms it took? It made Techno wonder if he’d have a hard-to-explain circular scar on that arm that would stare angrily at him for the rest of his life.

“Tomorrow, I’ll let you walk around as long as someone’s with you when you’re out of your room,” Phil decided, nodding decisively. “Maybe if it was any other spider, I would’ve let you out beforehand, but...the effects of this kind aren’t the best documented.” His mouth curled into a small frown.

His silence seemed to be enough for Phil to start on rambling about it.

“Apparently, ah, they only start showing up in worlds after there’s been enough time for spiders to reproduce and form enough varieties, some of which tend towards poison- and it’s not like all the smaller worlds give up all their information on them for free, and on those bigger, older worlds they’ve been eradicated for years and years. Anything about them is distant history. Guess we better keep on the lookout for more, now.”

“...How does that even work?”

“I don’t entirely know, myself, even though I count as the admin of this place,” Phil hummed, not looking entirely happy with the prospect of the spiders coming back. “I need to look more into it. Those larger servers have enough manpower to trace those spiders to their root whenever they show up, but there’s just me and whoever visits- currently you three, sometimes Tubbo.” He sighed, and Techno could almost taste the exhaustion that Phil clearly had, scrambling to find any information about it ever since he had been hurt.

“If those spiders keep coming, and if they’re aggressive enough to get past your guard- even when you’re not at your best- they could be fatal to me on my own.”

Something lurked, dark and heavy, in Techno’s gut. It screamed and howled at that statement, enough for him to ball his hands into fists and clench as tight as he could until he could feel his arms- especially the bitten one- become a crescendo of pain, bringing his focus into a razor-sharp edge.

“They won’t be,” he muttered, “because I’ll be here.”

“Techno,” Phil said softly, taking a moment to clasp a fist in his hands, “You won’t be here all the time, especially after you remember everything and want to go out on your own, okay? You’re welcome here whenever, but you won’t be here all the time.”

“I *will* be.”

Gods above, he would stay here. He’d grown attached to these people, to Phil most of all, and the line between the past and the present kept slowly, slowly growing thinner.

He wanted to stay here. He wanted to sew little bags of lavender with Phil, the motions somehow more precise than anything else he could do. He wanted to fish and farm and make sure Phil’s home was safe.

He wanted-

“No. No, Techno, you *won’t* be. It’s fine, okay? I knew you’d be in and out of here ever since you stepped foot in Hypixel. You were back and forth since before we found Tommy, even.” The corners of his eyes crinkled up, and was that a hint of sadness in his eyes? “I wouldn’t complain if all of you would come back more often, though. It’d liven things up more than the spiders would!”

That was. A good change of subject. “...Does the generational mutation happen with other creatures?”

Phil took a beat, took two. He leaned back and took a long sip of tea, long since grown lukewarm. “Probably with some of them, the ones that reproduce naturally,” he said, lingering on every word thoughtfully. “I’m not sure about the zombies, since they have a pretty quick death cycle- same with skeletons, but since they come out of the earth from ambient energy...change the energy, maybe you can change exactly what comes out.”

What the hell did *ambient energy* mean?

“With creatures of the Nether, though, I’d bet it’s likely- they reproduce naturally, too, although Poglins aren’t the type to leave the Nether or be interested in the wider universe. You’ve been able to translate whole conversations between Poglins to me, although we never went there unless we needed something- they have a language, a culture. They probably change as slow as humans do. But...spiders would be the biggest culprits for variants, followed perhaps by creepers, but they’re sparse to begin with.”

“...Aren’t there things in the water?”

“They don’t particularly like coming up to land, but if you go down there, I think you’d find more variety than up here. Nothing dangerous enough to always pose a serious threat, though, in most of the rivers, lakes and oceans...most dangerous thing you’ll find is a trident-wielding Drowned, but that’s just because they’re the designated hunters for their groups.”

“...Tridents.”

“Yes?”

He could feel the weight of a trident, could feel some kind of energy propelling him forward, could run his fingers along the etched edge of one and know that it would return when called.

He knew the difference, in some way, between a trident cutting through water and a trident going through a body.

That wasn’t exactly a welcome thought at the moment. He refused to let the thought go any further before the tea in his body decided to leave.

Techno let his fists relax before, seconds later them again. “I think I had a trident, once,” he mused, looking to Phil and then out the window, where he could see the border between the land and the ocean. “In some other server, where they gave those out to fight with...”

Hypixel, he thought. *It’s always mentioned. It’s familiar. That’s the place, right?*

“What were they like?” As Phil asked, the blonde started to dab a bit of a potion onto his arm. From the smell, Techno was pretty sure that it was just a weak one to promote passive healing, but, well- it was just a hunch. It was bitter beyond belief. “The tridents?”

“...Interesting,” he said after a long moment, thinking and *thinking* but not getting a clearer picture in his mind’s eye. “I think...I was alright at it. Not close to the best, but...alright. I remember...rain.” Very, very faintly, but it was almost as if he could smell energy in the air, the charge before a storm, damp and foreboding. He sniffed once more and found only the smell of lavender in his nostrils.

“*Techno*, not the best at a weapon?”

“If my body didn’t act it out for me, I’d laugh you off if you told me I was anywhere approaching decent at fighting to begin with,” he murmured, not smiling at Phil’s joking

manner. "If my memories hadn't start to come back. If I hadn't, apparently, enjoyed fighting before all of this happened."

The room fell silent, devoid of their quiet chatter as Phil finished up with the potions lined up beside him. The man, his *brother* sighed, started to bandage up Techno's arm, and looked up at him just as he finished with it. The only thing that could be heard after a moment was Techno's voice, laid bare in the quiet.

"I'd never want to be the best at weaponry."

"Techno?"

"...What?"

"If nothing else," he murmured, "don't talk bad about who you were before. It doesn't matter if you just- stop fighting as much, after you get all of your memories back, or if you go back to things you don't remember yet. If you were thinking you were a *monster*, if you think you're a person who just gets caught up in a fight for the sheer *thrill* of it..."

Techno stared. *Was Phil a mind reader?*

"Before anything else," Phil said firmly, "you fought to *protect*. To protect *yourself*, to protect *us*, to protect those you *cared for*. You trained us in the past. That's an extension of that. To battle against others in places with stakes lower than permanent death is training yourself, in a way. It's not a selfish thing."

Phil helps us survive, Tommy. I help to destroy.

He frowned and looked away from Phil's too-intense gaze, face hot with a budding sense of shame. "How would *you* know that?"

"Because, silly-"

Phil drew him into a short, tight hug, ignoring the slight spasm he got from Techno's surprise.

"You told me so yourself, not too long before that whole potato war deal started. Take it from your former self if nobody else, okay?"

"I could've been lying."

"You're not the kind of person to do that, Techno."

"...If you say so."

"...Hot chocolate?"

"Please."

That night, after Phil left, a frozen moment in time before Phil fetched someone else to watch him- or perhaps came back himself to double up on a shift- Techno sat in his bed with a cooled off mug of ‘hot’ cocoa and frowned, tracing the rim of the mug with an idle finger as he thought.

Be careful, too much thinking could hurt you, something murmured internally, and he quirked a little smile. A hunch said that too many people had said that to him. He’d probably said it to too many people, too. It blended together, but not in a way that was altogether *horrible*.

What was the line between fighting for sport and fighting to protect? What was the line between fighting to purely destroy and fighting to survive?

He considered the dark liquid in his mug, probably looking far too serious for the moment. He watched it for a moment, examined how it moved as he tilted the mug back and forth, and couldn’t help the sharp exhale from his nose as he set it, unfinished, on the bedside.

The spider bite pulsed once, twice, thrice, a constant underlying hum to his life as he knew it in the past days, the past week. It acted as a neverending drum beat, accompanying his heart like a thump to a guitar. Was it worrying that the consistency comforted him?

Perhaps.

You’re not the kind of person who lies.

Even as he remembered more and more, brought back by smells and words and *experiences*, he still found himself with holes in his mind that became more and more evident. There was the fact that, even with so many memories of fighting, of training, of everything, he couldn’t quite connect the dots. Why had he done *this*? How had he done *that*? Everything tangled up and up and up until he wanted to pull at his hair, until he wanted to scream and scream and hack his lungs right out onto the floor.

Were his scars marks from where he had protected someone, or where he hadn’t thought of himself, only of his objective to hurt? When he fought elsewhere, did he go for a quick, painless kill or to bring suffering upon whatever poor soul he faced?

Had he died before?

Techno never dies, something hummed in the back of his mind, echoed until it reached the deepest recesses and clung there to dear life. *Techno never dies, the Blade never dies, the Blood God never dies.*

It made him take a deep breath. Let it out.

(What happened when someone died, if you were in a server that would let you respawn? Were you reset to some kind of base form? Did scars carry over? Were you returned to a state where your skin laid unblemished, not marred?

He couldn't remember. He couldn't remember, he couldn't remember, couldn't remember couldn't remember couldn't *couldn't*-)

He groaned and leaned back, throwing his no-good, terrible, *horrible* bandaged arm over his eyes. Thinking just wasn't *worth it*, sometimes. Far easier to let yourself drift, to unmoor from the shores of reality- but wasn't that what had fucked everything up to begin with? Was his faint sense that the war had been about leaving something behind *correct*?

For better or for worse, Techno had to face the half-hidden shadow of himself and not shy away.

He was scarred. Far more scarred than it seemed Wilbur, Tommy, or even Phil had to be. It left him wondering if reviving really did take scars away- and, if that was true, and Phil had revived when visiting another place, would Phil deserve more scars than him? Or did he just live a hell of a lot more cautiously than Techno ever had?

He lifted his arm up and examined it for what had to be the millionth time in the past week, much less the month, looked at all the scratched up skin with its slightly smoother or raised bits, just a little whiter than the rest of his body. Even just the arm, as the sleeve slipped down, showed far more than he would think on first glance. A wicked curve, a slash, multiple cuts from what had to be nicking himself on something or barely escaping a blade, a proper bite, an arrow.

Even his hands weren't unmarred. The tip of one finger was blunter than the rest, something he hadn't actually paid attention to before because it was just a *part* of him. Maybe it had been cut off by...something or another long ago. Certainly not recently, that was for sure.

But were these the scars of someone aiming to *defend*? That was what kept picking at him, what left him still *looking* instead of taking another drink of lukewarm cocoa to fall asleep with. Were these really for what Phil said, or was he a liar?

He couldn't be a liar. Phil wouldn't lie to him, not about something like this.

He let out a long, softer groan, making sure to not bring anyone into the room earlier than they decided to be.

Fuck it all.

It made his stomach sick, made him feel smaller than anything and everything, but he couldn't fucking escape from the loop his mind went in, the circles it ran around his psyche. The more he kept thinking about it, the more he felt he would go insane.

He needed *more*. He needed to remember more, needed to hoard it all up and devour recollections like cursed little pieces of candy. It had gone from a reluctance to a vague acceptance and then to a ravenous *hunger*, eating at him until he continued on the path of investigating and shying away, investigating and shying away.

He'd find out who he was. He would.

He would, no matter what it cost in the end.

Chapter End Notes

pretty shell fuckin shocked that this has as many kudos and hits as it does. makes all my other fics look bad, huh. a quick salute to my two obscure fandom fics that have like 20 views each. thank all yall.

december's here. whether you love or hate the month and christmas cheer, hope the month goes well for you. <3

xi. i was made to become a sanctuary

Chapter Summary

After he's considered well enough to at least walk on his own, Techno's allowed around the house. Tommy's bad at remembering the right names for things. Techno thinks about a skeleton of a home.

(Or: There's not all that much rest in remembering.)

Chapter Notes

[chapter title from "six" by sleeping at last]

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

"You didn't finish your drink?" Phil watched as Techno, fresh out of bed before dawn, finally allowed to move about in the house with supervision, and almost looking like death warmed over, poured the dregs of his hot chocolate into the sink.

Techno hummed, vague and sleepy, as he stared down at the sink. It was another beat before he reached up to turn the faucet and let it all properly drain, another beat before he watched brown turn clear with the rushing water. Clean away all the blurriness. "Nah."

"Why not?"

He set the mug in the sink and shrugged, adjusting his faithful cloak almost as if it were a shield from the world. If he thought about it, it almost felt as if it actually were one, words etched into it and all. *Protect whoever wears this.* The thought was hazy. Indistinct. "Too sleepy. You know how it is."

You're not the kind of person who lies, Techno.

How true was that now? How true was it when one lie rolled into one, rolled into two, into many more?

"...I didn't get enough sleep for this."

"Mm. Same."

"Then go sleep, you-"

Techno huffed out a breath, faintly amused, and glanced at Phil before he looked back to the sink, eyes on the mug for a second, two...a third, and he looked away. "It's gettin' light out, Phil. Why waste it?" Maybe they'd let him lounge by the window closest to the potato field. Tommy had promised that he'd keep it in the best shape he could, but *still*. One could never be too worried over their potato field, right?

"At least lay down on the couch and close your eyes. Get some rest for 'em before the sun properly comes up and Wilbur and Tommy come barging in."

"...Aye aye, captain."

"Hah."

He flopped down onto the couch, winded from moving around, pressure and position of his spider-bitten arm having complained ever since he stumbled out of bed with Phil at his side. He groaned, let his arm rest on top of his chest, and tried his best to block out the pain, tried his best to drift into slumber.

A side dish of memories was fine. He didn't care. Better to be half-asleep and remembering bits than half-awake and only knowing pain.

Techno closed his eyes and let himself come along for the ride.

"Why do you like lavender so much?"

Techno froze from where he was clumsily sewing a bag up, shooting an incensed glare behind him at Phil, who walked in and sat delicately on his bed. *Gods*, he was so much taller than him- only half a year into living with the guy, with Wil, and it didn't seem to be getting any better. Even *Wilbur* was shooting further up in height, which was only fuel to the fire that was their bickering.

"Smells good," he said, and the words rolled clumsily over his tongue but *stuck*, understandable even through the slightly slurred syllables. He looked back to the bag with a frown and started finishing it up. "Soft. Not too strong. Diff'rnt."

"What about roses?" He could almost sense the way that Phil tilted his head, his tone genuinely curious about the answer.

Genuinely *caring*.

Techno sniffed, noticing the way that roses bled into the distinctly *lavender* smell of the room. It was on Phil's clothes, was probably in his room. He thought he had seen roses around there, but...yeah. *That was the red flower, right?*

"Not the same. Not. Not as soft. Lavender's better."

“How *could* you! I swear, I’m going to replace all your bags with mine—”

It was odd, to have someone ruffle his hair. Usually, they just tried to stab him if they were close. Those were the things you had to get used to when adopted by a strange creature- a *human*, Phil had told him, making Techno a ‘hybrid’- whatever *that* meant, too- but it was. Nice.

Phil drew him close after he finished a bag, ruffling his hair a bit more while Techno groaned and half-heartedly tried to struggle away. It ended up with Phil, back against the wall on his bed, fingers combing lightly through Techno’s hair while he relaxed, minding less and less the way that the lavender smell of the room started to mix with dried roses.

“I’ll teach you how to do it a bit neater later,” Phil murmured, “but first, let’s get your hair all neated up...we can’t have you getting your hair in everything, can we? I picked up a few ways to braid from my mother, back when I lived in another server...”

Techno simply *melted* into Phil’s touch, dozing away as his hair started to get braided.

Phil was good. Wilbur, even as a brat, was good.

In times like these, he could let memories of red skies and sharp tusks fade away.

“Right there- yeah, yeah. Good. Have you done this before? I mean, it’s the simplest stitch, but—”

“I have to sew up bags of lavender to put in my wardrobe as well as patch up my own clothes when they tear,” Techno said, and it shut the other person up for a long moment. He examined his work critically, a square of fabric with a razor-straight line of stitching through it right next to a few test letters, and sighed.

It was all so *boring*.

“I think I’d like to go onto the other lessons now,” he murmured. “I have things to do. I know what you offered, but I can’t waste this much time on the less useful parts if I want to get any good at this.”

“You’re good with a sword, yeah?”

He glanced up. A blank face smiled at him.

“You know I’m good with a sword,” he told them, and it was flat with the kind of cold that could only be brought out when he was well and truly *annoyed*. “You know who I am. I’d say *everyone* here in this server knows who I am.”

“Techno, the Blade, the fledgling Blood God...” They waved a hand and laughed. “I mean, it’s impressive! Enough to be in a lavish apartment and about to move into one that’s even better! But you had to get good at the sword somehow, right? By practice...and practice...and practice...even for the simplest things!”

A fire-lightning sky. A sharp cry. A memory that flashed up within a memory, unable to be seen from clouds of haze. Ruined immersion, for a second, before he was back to being the full Techno that was being remembered. He frowned at the thought, the memory clearly sparking *something* up within him. (What was it, to be so strong?)

“Stitches this simple aren’t even worth muscle memory. How can a straight line influence your work? If you’re good at straight lines, it doesn’t even matter to you.”

“But it *does* matter, you see? You get faster the more you do it. The faster you get, the more stitches you can chain in a line even when you’re doing more complicated techniques. The more work you can get done for profit, for family, for *anything*...”

“You haven’t even taught me runes yet. It’s been a week.”

“This is how *I* learned it, okay? Maybe we can start on it next time, if you’re good enough, and I can actually fetch my old notebook...”

He was going to strangle them. Oh, how he wanted to just *scream*-

“I don’t know about this kid, chief.”

“Stop calling him *chief*, Techno. *Gods*, that’s so dumb. Just call him Phil. Or, you know, *brother*.”

“Don’t know about Wil, chief.”

“You two, stop it,” Phil chided, raising his eyebrows at the two of them as he presented...a *kid* to them. Blonde hair, almost a little like him, already trying to grow up like a beansprout. A little weed in the grass that was just asking to be trampled on for looking even faintly like their older brother.

Why was there a stranger here? Were they a monster in disguise or something?

His hand drifted to his side, where a little gold-plated dagger sat.

“*Techno*.”

His hands clasped right back together at his front, where they had surely been intended to be all along.

“Don’t know about this kid, chief,” he repeated blandly, eyes leaving the kid to go back to their brother. “You call me back here right before a tournament weekend to see...a *kid*?”

“This is more important than a tournament,” Phil said, disappointment seeping deep into his voice. Not mad, never truly furious- but *disappointed*. Techno stiffened, closed his mouth, and shut up.

“He looks like a fuckin’ bitch,” a voice muttered, and Techno’s eyes flashed to look at the kid again- a scowl on their face, deep and angry as they stared directly at Techno. “Hate ‘im.”

“He’s your new brother now, Tommy,” Phil said, all soft and kind where he had been hard edges to Techno, and looked back to them. “This is Tommy, you two. He’ll be your new brother.” *No arguments, you two.* “Treat him good, alright? Make sure to stay here more often. It’ll be nice to have you back, Techno- nice to have everyone together.”

Ah, fuck. Playing the family card.

“I’ll be going back for the tournament,” he sighed, “but I’ll make sure to come back straight after for you nerds.” *Even if this kid’s more of a brat than Wil was.* Wilbur hit him. He slapped the hand away. He didn’t need any nasty mind readers near him. “...Nice to meet you, Tommy.”

Where had Phil gotten this kid, anyways? This was a private server that had been around for a year already.

...Maybe they were related by blood?

...Didn’t matter. He was here now, and it was all that mattered, even if it wasn’t a twist that he or Wilbur had expected.

Tommy’s grin was sharp and wide and *brittle* and it only made Techno all the more thoughtful for it.

“Be quiet, you two, Techno’s *resting*-”

“Oh! Hey, big guy! You’re out here now! Did you see the bees- I moved where I keep them, you know, they’re all buzzing around right outside the window here, Tubbo said they looked *great* and I was all like, ‘I know’, because I *knew*, and then he showed me a picture of where he’s keeping *his* bees, and it’s like a *designer home*-”

“Tommy. Really.”

“He’s clearly awake, Phil!”

"He's not wrong," Techno groaned, opening one eye to see Tommy grinning right in front of him. *Little shit.* "Back up a bit, Tommy, gods."

He gave a little shuffle back. Techno rolled his eyes- or just *eye*, perhaps, but it wasn't as if it mattered that much. An eye roll was an eye roll.

"Rest some more," Phil chided-

"I have. Just hasn't done me any good."

"Well," Wilbur said, "here's to you resting better, huh? And to you getting out of your room." He mimicked a cheers with an empty hand from behind Tommy before he absently nodded a greeting and swept by properly into the kitchen.

"You want, uh, some honey milk?"

"It's called *honeyed* milk," Techno corrected Tommy, and held back a chuckle when Tommy started muttering under his breath about how right he was and how so, so wrong Techno was. *Yeah, sure, kid.* "...I wouldn't exactly say no to it. Don't know exactly how long I slept, but it...wasn't that well." Not in the sense of nightmares, but just...he didn't feel *rested*. He felt exhausted- perhaps from memories, perhaps from the damned bite, or even perhaps his aching knee feeling like there was going to be a strong storm in a few days. Ah, well. It could have been anything.

"Maybe I should have kept you back in your room for another day," Phil murmured, and then started muttering to himself about *spider bites* and *data* and *more information to get*, which made Techno tune him out and listen more to Wilbur and Tommy, the younger of which had gone to the kitchen and was humming something of Wilbur's in a terrible off-key tone while making what Techno had requested.

"Hey- Tommy, that's not even *right!*"

"*My* song now, bitch boy," Tommy proclaimed, and Techno let everything fade into blissful background noise as he shifted on the couch, pulling a throw blanket over him and squinting blearily up at the rotating fan above. Sure, it was good, it stopped everything from feeling so *stifling*, but it was right *over* him. *Really*, Phil?

Come to think of it- had he helped in the creation of his house, if the home of his earlier memories had a whole different layout? Had he chopped down wood, maybe, or made sure everything was safe, or did all the heavy lifting? Who had *designed* it?

I wonder, he thought, *if we lived inside here before it was secure from monsters.*

Now that was a thought. It was almost like- almost like something he remembered in flashes of sound, things he remembered in the dead of night while staring at the darkness of his room, expecting it to stare back at him-

“Phil,” Wilbur muttered, “night’s falling.”

“You think I haven’t noticed?” Phil sighed and stepped back, wiping at his forehead as he stared at their skeleton of a home. Nothing was properly up, not yet- even with three people, it was a monumental effort, one that wouldn’t be properly lit up or guarded until everything was done. Even fancy new *admin powers* could only do so much, since Phil only knew the bare essentials- and it wasn’t like those powers were designed for building a home. “...We’ll have to go back underground for the night. Hole up where we dug out and get everything out when morning comes and we’re better rested.”

They’d probably be sleeping in that damned hole for another month, wouldn’t they?

“They could destroy what we’ve built,” Techno pointed out from where he was crouched, considering two different types of wood set before him. He hummed and picked the darker wood, hefting it up onto his shoulder. “It’d be a disaster.”

“You don’t know that, Techno. Wilbur- come over here, yeah? We need to take some of these things back to our temporary base, make sure everything’s alright, see if we can light up more of the area. Techno, can you bring in the door? We hadn’t planned on installing it today, anyways, and I don’t want the glass in it to get broken.”

“Fine.”

Techno groaned, dropped the wood down, and busied himself as Wilbur and Phil did the same, making the short trek to the base they had carved out from one of the hills and been using for the past month. Perhaps it was just because he hadn’t actually moved servers before to a regular, fresh start, but it was a hell of a lot more work than he had expected. Gathering resources, checking the area, making sure this exact spot in your new world was where you wanted to set up...and they *all* had different ideas of what they should do.

At least *he* hadn’t argued with Phil for a solid day about the way the house should be oriented, like Wilbur had. He swore his ears still rung from Wilbur’s arguments and Phil’s constant sighing.

The sun set on the horizon, glimmering over the ocean’s lazy waves. Techno considered it with a frown before he continued stacking up wooden planks closer to the build site, making sure they were all together and couldn’t be destroyed, even in the open. Base materials were resistant like that. Nearby, Wilbur and Phil were tacking some of the smaller chests they had drug out, pushing them back to the site- if opened, they’d be ruined.

In the distance, right at the edge of the overgrown forest at the back of the hills, he saw a glint of...*something*. His hand drifted to where a bow would have been strapped on his back- but he found nothing and cursed, quickly making sure the planks he had been carrying were fine before rushing back to their little base.

He had put the bow in there, right? If he remembered correctly, the bow and its quiver had to be right on his bed or right next to it or right-

There. There they were. He checked everything else- axe, yes, sword- no, he didn't need that extra weight- and strode out of the house, bow in hand and quiver secured. He ignored Phil's *look* as they passed each other and walked further away from the build site, where the lanterns and light sources they had set up petered out, leaving only growing darkness and watching eyes.

Yes, that was a monster he had seen. And knowing how the forest had shaped up over the past weeks, the monsters he had watched burn in the daylight and how many probably still lurked there- he plucked an arrow from the quiver, drew, and shot at what he could see after a second.

An arrow soared right back, missing him by a few feet.

Skeleton- fuck, I need to get close-

He hissed at the arrow that barely nicked him and started making his way forwards, shooting at the rare other monster coming out so early into the evening. He got a zombie, two spiders, a creeper- but that skeleton was a problem, and it was only growing more accurate with every shot it took.

He looked back behind him after the latest shot, frowning in the direction of the construction and of their base. They both appeared to be hurrying to get the last of their things safe and to get inside- good. It was best that they were safe, when they were the ones who knew more about what they wanted. Techno just wanted something warm.

An arrow whizzed past, and he stopped all pretenses of just advancing normally to put his bow on his back and rush in, cloak whipping around him as he sprinted to where the skeleton stood.

If he had to pick one at bowpoint, skeletons were the absolute *worst* mob to fight. He loved hand-to-hand combat and regular weaponry, yes, but it was a pain in the ass to have to advance and duck and advance some more before he was finally able to rip their bow away from them, to snap it and tear their protected core out.

It always meant that he had to break some of those bones, that he had to smash into them with the blunter side of his axe before he could break that internal core where a heart would have been in a living person. No blood, *never* any blood- but it took *time*, and that was what always hurt someone in the end.

Not him. Never him, not after he figured out their deal, but it was always that they cost him on other matters. He broke its core, let the glowing substance spill out like luminescent yolk upon the falling bones, and spun around to *splat* a behemoth of a spider that had jumped at him.

Another arrow flew past as he shook his axe out.

What a fucking night he would have, already exhausted from helping Phil build the house all day. *Fuck this, man.*

Another hour, just enough to get through part of the horde that wanted them, and he'd go back. If everything was secure, they could just board up the entrance to where they slept in that hill and go back in for cleanup in the morning.

He just wished he didn't have to sleep covered in guts to actually stay safe, wished that he didn't have to wait until day to bathe in that damned stream a ten minute jog away, wished they had a proper water system and a bath, gods be damned, no amount of lavender would help him now that the mobs had finally taken root in the world-

Techno closed his eyes and let himself ride just above dozing as the bustle of the kitchen kept on. It wasn't enough for him to truly sleep, but it was probably more true rest than he had gotten over the whole of the night, no matter how many memories clicked, no matter how many other recollections hazily wandered by. When he opened his eyes again, it was to find Tommy in front of him, two steaming mugs in hand.

"Up," the kid demanded, wriggling his nose and motioning a bit with one of his hands for Techno to at least sit up properly.

What a brat. (*He loved this kid with all of his bloody, beating heart.*)

He took the mug with an idle hum and peered into it before taking a sip, welcoming the way that it, again, scalded his tongue just like *proper* hot chocolate and tea. "Maybe a bit more honey," he said thoughtfully, letting himself get more comfortable sitting on the couch. His legs rested underneath him, not quite crossed but more like they were off to the side, the mug making its way to a little table next to the couch to rest.

"I put *loads* of honey in! It's just way too hot for you to properly taste it!"

"Left it in too long, then."

"Hey- no, I *didn't*! I left it in as long as I needed!"

"*Far* too long," Wilbur called out, and Techno twisted his head, ignoring pain of past and present wounds to see him sliding into a chair at the dining table, plate of food in front of him. "And get your asses over here, Phil actually decided to make breakfast for once!"

"Like I did *yesterday*, and the day *before*, and-"

"Semantics, Phil, *semantics*."

"That's- I don't think that's how that word is used?"

Techno couldn't help but chuckle at Phil's confused tone. It was a welcome distraction as he picked up his mug, tried not to clench it too badly as his wound pulsed, as he thought of hazy

nights spent under an indigo sky, defending a home that was slowly being built from the ground up.

His mind was in two places, two wholly different worlds- but as he stood up and slowly moved to the dining table, as he saw Phil's exasperated smile and the bounce in Tommy's step and the pancakes that Wilbur was picking at, as he let that sense of family wash over him- he left the *then* and came closer to the *now*.

...Huh. The pancakes in front of him even had chocolate chips in them.

Score.

Chapter End Notes

hello. the chapter update schedule, starting with this chapter, will be every three days instead of every two. hope yall don't mind, but i need to make sure i keep ahead of schedule and don't fuck up the story. i feel very bad about it but i hope yall understand. thank yall very much.

i'm. gonna go back to working on the story now

o/

xii. i'm only honest when it rains

Chapter Summary

With enough time, the spider's bite becomes easier to handle. Phil gets philosophical, fishing in a storm. Techno contemplates the nature of a killer.

(Or: Before, he wasn't *soft*. He was *terrifying*.)

Chapter Notes

[chapter title from "neptune" by sleeping at last]

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Eventually, Techno's leash got longer.

The wound, unexpectedly enough, didn't exactly let up- but that constant pain had lowered itself into a background hum instead of a scream at the forefront, and when asked about it, he could only really honestly tell them that it didn't bother him as much.

"Does it hurt any less?"

...He couldn't exactly answer that. It didn't matter. Phil seemed to get it, even though Tommy and Wilbur were confused, and Phil reluctantly lengthened how far he could go without supervision, let him stay on the porch or accompany them on tasks outside of the house, provided he just watched.

"That bite," Phil told him after a few days, "is something we still have to keep an eye on. Has it been easier to eat? I know that even though you kept it all down, you still looked like you were having trouble..."

"Saw through my disguise," Techno grunted, and Phil just laughed. "...Yeah. Been better. Just don't know when this venom's gonna properly leave."

"Well," Phil said lightly, "at least it's not getting infected."

That had been that. Phil kept scouring databases through his modified communicator to try and figure it out, but- they just had to wait, in the end. It got better in increments. It didn't leave, but it got more bearable.

Tommy was the only one who didn't seem to shy away from asking probably invasive questions about the bite.

"So, like, how'd it get you? Get a good look at it?"

"No. It bit me as I was handling another mob and I got it right after. *Too hard to tell any differences in the dark.*"

"Repeat that last one, big man? That was all in fuckin'. Piglin speak."

"...Too hard to tell any differences in the *dark*."

"That last word, Mr. Blade?"

"...I will kill you."

"Hey, hey, hey! Bit too far there, don't you think?"

At least Techno was getting better with his words. It was a strange world that he lived in, language memory filtering back in without too much to nudge it. Harsh syllables and clicks of the tongue passed by, snorts full of meaning instead of a general annoyed feeling came back, and somehow- somehow- he couldn't always process the difference between words in that language and regular human speak.

Something was fucking him over, he bet, some bit of faulty memory not clicking or something from that server holding over even here.

(Had he ever spoken in that piglin language, there, neither it or the human tongue fitting him like a glove? Had he just never noticed himself mixing things up, or something, and only human tongues had remained when Phil appeared?

He'd never know, wouldn't he?)

Wilbur workshopped it with him, ran him through words as he beat out an idle rhythm on the dining table with his hands. They argued back and forth about things that neither of them seemed to fully grasp until Phil drug them apart, but there was only room for laughter there.

It was like trying to hunt treasure. Would this phrase he kept saying mean anything real? Would it unlock a treasure chest?

They focused on the present of those things, though, Techno and Tommy and Wilbur. Why would you talk about the past in truth when you were still worried about the wound that your sibling kept bandaged?

Phil, though- *he* was the one Techno whispered worries to, shared memories recalled, theorized with even as it made his skin crawl. He was the one Techno went to with the worries that seemed most frivolous, in the end.

It was clear that Phil noticed that fact.

“You don’t exactly talk with Wil and Tommy too much about the past, huh?”

Techno swung his legs back and forth (back and forth, back and forth) from where they dropped down from the dock, not quite long enough to have his feet try and skim the water. He had no fishing rod in his hands, no cloak on his back- two sweaters sufficed in the mild chill- but he did have a large umbrella over his head, one of the ones that stood on their own that Phil had brought out the very second it had started properly raining.

Hah. He wasn’t going to get his cloak wet. That had gone straight back to the house when they went to go get the umbrella.

He considered the question posed by Phil, who sat right next to him under the umbrella’s cover. Unlike Techno, he had a fishing rod in his hand, one very different from those that he had seen him with before. It was well taken care of, the fishing line stronger than what he seemed to usually have on him, the hook shinier and harder. It had etchings that scratched at the back of his mind on it, carved out with a delicate touch.

Luck. The gibberish stared right back at him. *Strength.* It was taunting him. *Intuition.*

It was something very, very clearly made for storms like these, and he had to wonder if a regular fishing rod would break in these conditions.

But- Techno wasn’t there to fish. He was there to listen to the pouring rain and talk without the threat of Wilbur and Tommy overhearing, and he could only frown as he thought more about the question, letting it soak in deep as he curled and uncurled his toes.

Phil, in these closer quarters, smelled of dried roses.

“I do,” he said slowly, “But I don’t...hm.”

How could one answer that? It wasn’t exactly a question, but it had a world of implications behind it: *Do you not trust your brothers? Is there something wrong with them?*

Is there something going on with you?

“Take your time.” Phil murmured, bumping Techno’s shoulder softly with his. “Storm’ll be here for a few more hours yet, and after that you can just busy yourself by checkin’ on the garden.”

That was true. That was good. The mud would cling to his bare feet, would ground him. He could get dirt under his nails and tidy up the garden and be something more than himself.

There were still questions to be answered.

"I...I do talk with them about it," he repeated, hands clasped together with one thumb rubbing endless circles on the back of his other hand. "But...it's harder. Better to talk about it with you instead of trying to talk about it with them and worry that they...noticed me spacing out. You know about it. They...they..."

They don't.

With Phil, those pauses, unknowable in length, were taken in stride. With the other two, he was pretty sure they'd worry on and on about him- Phil, what's going on? Phil, is it because of that spider bite? Phil, how can we fix this?

He had been lucky that they hadn't noticed it before, safe under the guise of injury or dozing or having his eyes closed. He had been very lucky. He didn't *want* any more of that worry.

"...Makes sense," Phil said, watching his line move before he tugged at it and- ah, that had to just be some kelp or something. The hook came up empty. "You've been troubled by something lately, too."

Techno froze.

"Think I haven't fuckin' noticed, eh?" He bumped shoulders again, clearly more in jest than in anger or full worrying mode. It made him blink- wouldn't he normally be more worried? Wouldn't he be holding his hands or something, or making some tea, or...what? Did he just like storms that much?

He looked back to the water pensively. "Maybe," he muttered. "Not really important."

"With you, especially how you've been recently- your mental health's important, Techno. Really. You don't have to tell me, not right now, but...I'm here to help. *We're* here to help. We love you, you know?"

He bit his tongue on the *not really*- because they *did* love him. They showed it all in their banter, in the way that they'd bump into him on their way past or worry over him after that spider bite that still sat there angrily on his arm, making its presence known by the second. They showed it in late night talks and lazy songs and in their arguments and in the way that there were extra chocolate chips in a pancake for him.

The wind picked up, but not quite enough to send rain sideways into their small almost-dry bubble of calm. It whipped up the ocean, though, enough for Techno to pull his legs up at a minor spray of water and cross them.

They sat there. The minutes crawled by. Phil's little bobber on the line swayed with the waves. There were no bites, not just yet.

"I don't think I believe you," he said, flat and almost *ashamed*, "when you talk about me and fighting."

Phil stayed silent, but it was clear that he was listening.

(That was what he had always liked about him, wasn't it? He had noticed it back when Phil had found him. He could speak, could comfort and heal and whisper, but he was the best listener out of them all when it came down to it.)

"My memories are coming back. Not all at once, but- faster, now." If he thought about it, it was almost like they were bubbles rising to the surface of water, faster and faster as air escaped from that past self down at the bottom, returning to him. "...Maybe because you're all here." He sighed. "But...I don't. I still don't understand what I like- *liked*- about fighting," he murmured, "even when I remember things about protecting someone, or training Tommy or- or any number of things."

There was a library in his head, almost, with the spines removed from all the books, with them being haphazardly shoved into little spaces as soon as he got them. If he looked in one, he'd remember cutting down all who came to face him in one battle, watching them fall to their demise on islands that hung in a circle in the sky. If he watched another, he could see himself in an arena, waiting for the next challenger to come, blood on his hands but no wounds to be seen.

If he looked again, he was throwing himself in front of his family to take a hit. Plunging a sword into a zombie, a spider, keeping them away from a half-built home. Running into a tunnel to hunt down his siblings and bring them to safety.

If he just looked-

One down. Ten others to go.

Techno didn't look at his sword, but he looked at the body that was left behind- an efficient twist and it was all laid out for him to see, all blood and guts and gore. It made him breathe in, the scent slapping at his nose, and it was all he could do to grin further and continue on.

His sword met another foe. It won. The third target managed to land a scratch on his cheek, but they were sent tumbling into the void-

-and another set of hands pushed him violently into the ether. He laughed as he fell, laughed like a crazy man, and the cloak on him whipped in the wind as he threw a pearl with a practiced hand.

Thought you could get me, huh?

They were the next to go. There was a pleasure in popping back into being above them, all armored up against his armorless form, and a delight that was found in watching them be unable to hack through his cloak. It'd bruise, sure, but he had personally made sure that no regular blade could tear through it.

“Blood for the blood god,” he called out, *laughing*, and imagined that the crowds that had to be watching were in a frenzy, cheering him on from wherever they stood. He plunged his sword into a crack in the armor, pushed and twisted and pulled.

It wasn’t enough.

Fine. If a sword won’t do-

“Hands will do just fine,” he breathed out, and the person didn’t know what hit them, staring into blank, dark red eyes, into an outfit covered with blood and gore. “They’ll do just fine.”

Twist the helmet off. In the absence of a blade, an easy way to stop an enemy would be to go for the eyes.

Done.

Now the neck, if he could get the chestplate to shift *just so-*

An arrow whizzed by.

There.

Neck snapped.

He lurched upwards, grabbing his sword and taking an axe from the downed victim, and turned to grin at the newcomer. They stood in front of him. They shook. They couldn’t even aim their bow correctly.

A newcomer, he guessed. Perhaps they preferred to shoot their opponents into the void rather than face the reality that wasn’t scrubbed clean by censors, the inner workings of people reduced to red smears on screens and filtered to hell and back.

Techno licked his lips, slow and silent. Examined his hands, red and nasty and viscous, as they held a weapon in each hand. His heart beat loudly in his chest, excited and echoing and the background to his panting.

“Say,” he called out to the next person that had come to face them, meeting their terrified gaze, “have you ever heard of the Blade?”

They didn’t know what hit them.

I am your worst nightmare. I am the lightning within this cacophonous symphony of combat. I am the only one allowed to sit on any throne in this land. When you see what I truly am, you will never see anything more beautiful. Gaze upon what I have orchestrated and despair, for this is the Blood God that you have only seen the false reality of for so long.

Are you still a fan, now? Am I still your idol?

He had never felt more alive.

He had to wonder how long the memories passed by. Phil was still silent. The rain was still pouring. Had the direction changed?

If he looked back in that library, he was stringing a bow.

He looked again, and he was farming. Again, and he was fighting. Again, and he was drowning with the weight of everything he still didn't know, everything that tried to cling to him and instead slid off.

"...I just want to farm." He went back to rubbing circles on his hand, anxious and refusing to let his breathing catch. *Don't think of what you just remembered, don't think of it, don't think of it.* "I don't want to fight, not really. But I- It felt like I *liked* it, in the memories, of beating people and asking for more to come. I *liked* it and I trained you all to be *better* at fighting and killing and it doesn't matter that you say I'm a protector, Phil, if that past me just lived for that blood and loved the adrenaline and-"

"Techno, can you- can you wait, just a second?"

His mouth *clicked* shut on its own. He stared down at his trembling hands.

An arm wrapped around him, solid and secure. Thunder crashed in the distance. "You might not remember this, not just now," he started, "but we've talked about this, Techno." He chuckled. "We've...we've had this conversation a lot, actually. It sort of feels like it's an annual thing? Not in the last year or two, but...you're hard on yourself, Techno, you really are. You always have been."

Really.

"Really," Phil said. Fuck, had he said that out loud? "You're always going to have adrenaline during a fight. There's always going to be that rush just because that's what bodies *do*. They like to pump you up and they want to make sure you get through that and win because it wants you to *survive*. Well- you want *you* to survive, I guess. It's just that the body recognizes that."

He sighed, and when Techno actually looked over he had a mimicry of that crooked smile from so long ago, back when they were across a fire and Techno was only thinking of potatoes. "In the moment, it's *everything*. And that happens to everyone- you, me, Wil- and especially Tommy, gods, he's just an adrenaline junkie of a kid. If you just remember the fights, not what surrounds it...then you're not getting the full picture, are you?"

"But the fights are what *matter*."

"Don't act like you don't have a brain, Techno. Context is *everything*, and you're missing that for so much of your life while the biggest bits of impact are what remain. Techno, whenever

you've come to me about it before you've gone '*Phil, does this make me a monster? Am I doing this for selfish reasons?*' You've talked to me about it before. You really have, Techno. I'm not just doing a bit."

...Huh.

"Sure, not all fights are in the context of protecting. And protecting isn't all of who you are. But in all the respawnable servers, Hypixel, Mineplex, others- people go into those fights with the expectation of there being a *winner* and a *loser*. They have it for sport, and it's lighthearted. They don't think of it as them being a monster. But they didn't exactly grow up the same as you did, you know? A lot of them came from densely populated worlds with no thought of dying to something in the wilderness, even though death meant, well. Dying permanently. A lot of their fighting- and a lot of dying- is either against sicknesses or against each other."

"...Have I been to one of those servers before? One of the...ones that are regular but...have cities? And nations, and such?"

Nice topic change. It was obvious that Phil, as he followed that thread of thought, was mostly just entertaining him for a second or two.

"I think I took you to one when you and Wil were young, the first time you visited another server," Phil said, and let out a little bit of a laugh. "The city where I was born and my parents were from. Wilbur found it fascinating and you- hah, you hated it. Too much noise, you said, too much grime, too many people. Most of the other big servers you went to at least had subworlds- but the traditional servers don't do that."

...It didn't exactly make sense, but he'd take Phil at his word.

"So I went there to get you two some vaccinations, because that place had been around long enough to get vaccinations for most things you could think a kid would need, growing up- even vaccinations for things that would matter in a small, lonely place in the middle of nowhere."

"...They must be...weird."

"They are," Phil said, and at that point Techno had stopped caring about their previous conversation. "They care about things like *politics*, they have proper systems of currency, they throw their kids off into private worlds if they have enough money to care about the best schooling. They throw their kids into places like Hypixel if they want a vacation, or if they're getting good at an extracurricular activity, or...whatever." He waved a hand. "Complicated stuff. Was how I grew up before I went and decided that I liked providing for myself more."

"Sounds...dumb."

"Maybe to you and Wil and Tommy," he teased, "but I grew up there- and I'm not going to let you try to change the conversation more than you already have, buddy. I'm far too smart for that."

Fuck.

“But...that’s the kind of world so many more people grew up in. So fighting’s kind of fantasized. Fetishized? Whatever the correct term is. They’ll say that fighting’s not good unless you’re doing it in a place where people can come back, when it’s all for sport or fun or show, and anywhere outside of those special servers like Hypixel, fights can have serious consequences. Death. Permanent injury. You know, why duel in a place where you won’t come back when you could just hop to the closest place with those protections and duke it out?”

“...”

“But they still...*romanticize* fighting. They like the people that have their catchphrases, that kill flashy, that get someone in an interesting way rather than *brutal* and *quick* and *effective*. They like the honorable road and not the way that actually gets results when it comes down to it in real life. And that was where you’d ask me *Phil, is it bad that I fight simpler than those people, is it bad that I enjoy fighting this way? Should I do it differently, am I in the wrong for feeling like I’m going to throw up once I’m out of a fight?*”

“I think you’re confusing what you remember,” Phil murmured, “for those memories being all there is. Confusing what you feel in the *moment* for what you had to have surely felt all that time. There’s a facade to keep up, one where you tell people that you fit in in a public space like that, and you can like parts of it but feel disgusted afterwards. I’m not much of a fighter, not really. It’s a relief to make sure the mobs won’t get to us, but in another server without terrible consequences- I’m still terrified of dying, I still feel dirty afterwards for ending someone’s life, even for a moment, because what if I actually had killed them? I think...you never really told me much, not any details about what you think deep down, but I think you just never wanted to lose. Never wanted to lose and end up losing again *later*, when it mattered the most.”

“I don’t really understand,” Techno said after a long moment, thunder echoing as a jolting backdrop, and that was the only thing he really *could* say. His mind still mulled over it all, turning over every stone to find directions to another stone on it, and it was all just an endless loop. “I don’t. I really don’t.”

How could that former self even be willing to partake in such fighting? Wasn’t it better to stay in a smaller space and just fight monsters, if you really had to? Why cut people down and see- and see-

“You don’t have to, not just yet,” Phil returned and interrupted his thoughts, just as soft as Techno’s voice had been. “But just keep in mind that you’re more than what you remember, okay? The Techno of the past was just as happy to do random tasks or busy work or mine or chop down wood or whatever as you are to farm. You liked to read. You liked to argue stupid, minute points and laugh at us. The quiet moments, the contextual moments, are just the ones that come last. They’re the glue that holds it all together.”

Techno closed his eyes, listened to Phil, listened to the rain beat against the umbrella. Tried to think of *glue* and of *bonds* and of *remembrance*.

Thunder crashed again. Even with so much of his life gathering in his hands, Techno could only think about how much was slipping by, just barely out of his reach to comprehend.

Even as who he once was got clearer and clearer, that figure at the bottom of his mind seemed determined to swim down even deeper than before.

He wanted to find it out. He had *promised* it to himself, no matter how happy or not he was with its eventual end.

Phil's line tugged once, twice, three times. Techno let out a shaky breath as Phil cursed and let go of him to start reeling the line in.

What was someone who had lost who they were? What was someone- *who* was someone when they had to pick up the pieces of their life while living the role of a total stranger? Were the pieces all glued back in the right spot, or were they superglued to where it was thought they belonged only to end up with a broken piece of artwork, half of its shards all stuck in the wrong places?

What kind of a restoration would he be, when it was all said and done?

Techno couldn't shake the thought that he would only be a patchwork shell of a person.

Are you a monster, or are you just humane enough to choke on what you barely know you've done?

The storm raged on.

Chapter End Notes

this is probably the chapter i'm most proud of, besides 1, 2, and 4! hope yall liked it!

and it's a shame i can't post it earlier in the day, but i'm at work..... ;;w;;

have a lovely night, everyone! see ya in ~three days!

xiii. so a boyish constitution / gets to lead a revolution

Chapter Summary

There's a lot to be concerned about, when Techno's not solely focusing on himself. Techno investigates something that's been bugging him lately. Wilbur...spills the beans in a bit of a major way.

(Or: In what kind of world do you throw yourself away so carelessly as a child soldier?)

Chapter Notes

[chapter title from "false disposition" by ferry ft. vflower]

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“You hang out with Phil a lot more than you do us.”

Techno let an eye open from where he was laid out on the couch just in time to see Wilbur drop onto the other side, moving Techno’s legs just so he could sprawl out himself and stare at Techno. His eyes weren’t heavy, but they were bright with an odd kind of intensity. He frowned at Wilbur.

“Mm. Yeah.”

“Why?” Wilbur tilted his head, and it struck him just how much his older brother looked like an owl, blinking at him in an echo of his own thoughts. “Do you just remember more about him? Is it because he was the one to find you? Is it because Tommy’s a little shit? Like, I know it can’t be because of me. Of course.”

“Of course,” he echoed wryly before he sighed, shook his head, and let his other eye open, gaze drifting to where their television sat.

(How did televisions even work? There was nobody else in the world. Something in the back of his head murmured something about interworld connections and admin knowhow, but it really didn’t seem like what he knew of televisions would allow it. Even if it seemed they were mostly used to rewatch movies and shows that they had in a physical form.)

“Of course...?” When his eyes flicked over, he could see Wilbur’s eyebrows raised, an obvious question lingering in them. *Elaborate?*

"Phil found me first," he said, reluctantly pulling himself fully into the conversation and giving it some proper attention. "And he's not...*pushy*. You and Tommy have been- better about it, you have, but it's just...easier to spend time with him."

Wilbur seemed to consider that explanation for a second before he snorted, before he crossed his arms behind his head and let one of his eyebrows arch further up. "You just want it to be quieter," he said. "Well. *I* can be quiet."

Techno considered just telling him that even his presence could be a bit like towering over him, but, well. That didn't seem like it would be a good idea at all. Either way, it seemed like Wilbur just...wanted to spend more time with him.

They always wanted to spend more time with him, but even though the topic of the conversation felt a bit heavy-handed, the sentiment behind it felt genuine. Not the kind of pushy that would make him shrink up or want to snap out.

It was a nice change of pace.

"Sure," he murmured. "Quiet. Cool."

"Did Phil or Tommy really tell you what was going on with Tommy and I, back when we weren't here?" Wilbur's eyes were sun-bright, shining with a heightened intensity that automatically made Techno regret saying *sure*. His voice was quiet, but his presence was anything *but*. He burrowed a bit further into his cloak, wrapped around him in soothing lavender. Ran his thumb along a seam.

"A bit," he allowed, letting that uncomfortable feeling settle and stay around him. Sure, it would be better if he got used to it and didn't stay on edge, but *damn* if it wasn't awkward to have this conversation that he didn't know the path of. "You've talked, ah, a bit about it too. Something about a revolution. Betrayals. You won?"

The intensity was dialed back a bit. Wilbur grinned, clearly prideful- with a thin layer of bitterness running underneath it- and ran a hand through his hair. "Yep," he said, popping the 'p' with a bit more enthusiasm and a wink. Techno wanted to become the couch, at this point, but alas. "You're speaking to the President-"

Wilbur paused.

So the explanation goes awry this early, huh?

"You're speaking to the *former* President of L'manburg, here," he said with a soft pound to his chest. "And you've *also* spoken to my Vice President, Tommy. Small world, huh?"

"Some...fancy titles you got there," Techno mumbled, very slowly trying to look for a way out of the situation. "...You're, um. Very passionate about it?"

Wilbur froze. Techno could practically watch as he replayed that moment in his mind, mouthing his words before he groaned and covered his face with his hands. "Sorry, sorry," he muttered. "Just- some *stuff* happened with it recently." He had a bad feeling about this. "And,

hah, funny thing, you know, we were going to ask for *your* help, especially since we heard when you won that war, thought you had some free time. We were going to ask you maybe a month after you were done! Give you some time, you know?"

...He *really* didn't like where this was going.

"And then we realized that, hey, none of us had talked with you recently, you know? Or saw you. Or knew anyone *else* that had talked with you."

Techno's mind was drawn to that broken piece of machinery, the little shell of a former communicator stored in a drawer in his room. He hummed. "And you hadn't. Talked with me. But." He carefully avoided Wilbur's eyes, let his view drift to where his legs laid across Wilbur's lap. "...Whenever you two have...talked about it- about...about your nation with me, you've. Avoided things. And it feels like they're *big* things."

"...Phil would, uh, maybe get mad at us if we talked about them and he ended up figuring things out past what he already has?"

...Was that a question or a statement?

Techno's eyebrows raised of their own accord. He struggled to get them back down and his face back to that poker face he had on lock most of the time, but it was *very* clear by the time his face turned to normal that Wilbur had noticed.

"Uh- not in like, uh, the *you fucked up, I'm coming for your asses to drag you back home* kind of way. Just the, uh...*you're going about this the wrong way* kind of deal. Yeah."

"...So it's fine if I tell Phil about this..."

"No! Um." Wilbur cleared his throat. "Maybe...maybe wait until *I* do? Preferably after Phil's had one of his favorite meals or drinks or is just in a great, wonderful mood that can't possibly be shaken by anything I have to say?"

He locked eyes with Wilbur, judgment crystal clear in his eyes even though he barely understood the situation. Wilbur gulped, long and slow. "Maybe I will," Techno said slowly. "Depends."

"Depends on..."

"Depends on what you *tell me*," Techno said. Let his eyebrows raise a hair. Watched his brother sweat and fidget like there was some terrible secret waiting to escape out from under his tongue, loose and free as a bird. "What could *possibly* go wrong with revolution, betrayals, and managing a nation only to...lose it, in the vaguest terms."

"When you put it like *that*..."

"I think it'd be nice to know what you keep skirting around." His voice did not stop. It did not stutter. It was steady, and it was heavy, and it was patient as only a predator in wait could be.

Wilbur would *talk*.

“Mm. Well. So, it all started when I joined this new server that Tommy was on maybe a month before you started that whole potato war, and it was managed by a new friend of ours, this admin named Dream- *crazy* good at fighting, I thought he had trained with you, to be honest, but he’s just way too flashy of a fighter for that...”

He settled in, eyes open and watching Wilbur with a silence that only made Wilbur quieter.

There was not one memory that faded in, as focused as he was on the story.

Of *course* it had layers.

Of course his brothers had blatantly put their lives on the line for something as foolish as revolution.

Of *course*.

“*Tommy*.”

Techno leaned against the doorframe of the boy’s room, looking at him with an unreadable, unknowable gaze. When Tommy finally looked back from where he was slouched in his chair- communicator out, fingers dancing as he flipped through whatever was on it- Techno watched his face bloom into surprise.

“*Heeey!* Decided to visit your favorite brother on your own for once, eh?” He seemed to puff up in pride a little, preening in the light, and Techno refused to acknowledge the whisper of regret that passed over him for not approaching Tommy on his own in the past few weeks. He refused. It wouldn’t do anything.

Instead, he let his brother preen a little more before he lifted up the mugs in his hands and nodded to them. Tommy’s eyes lit up.

“*Ooh*, what is it- hot cocoa? Honey milk? Coffee?”

“You’re still saying honeyed milk wrong,” Techno said dryly, “but...no. It’s tea.”

“*Eugh-*”

“It’s *tea*,” he repeated. “*Lavender* tea. And you’re going to drink it and...and have a *chat* with me.”

Perhaps he should have expected the incredulous, suspicious little look that Tommy shot at him. Thankfully, he had a counter in the form of his own utterly unimpressed poker face, easily able to cover up the pounding in his ears, easily able to distract Tommy from the way that the arm with the bite shook, holding one of the mugs. He shut the door neatly with his foot and passed one mug to Tommy, who scrunched his face up after a tentative sip- and then spluttered.

“That’s fucking *hot*, Techno, what the hell!”

He stared blankly at Tommy. There had been steam from it, how would it *not* be hot? And why didn’t Tommy just down it like Techno preferred to?

“...Sorry?”

“You’re not- ugh- *whatever*.” Tommy let his chair spin as Techno shuffled over to perch on his bed, cloak wrapped around him almost like a very fancy blanket. “I mean, you want to talk to me, great- but...about *what*? ”

“Wilbur,” he said, picking his words as careful as he could manage to, “told me about...what you two have been doing. For the past...” He hummed. “Year? Year and a half and some, some change? Two years?” It didn’t matter what his mind was hazily telling him the span was. It had been going on for a while at this point, and *that* was what was important.

He let his gaze settle back on Tommy. Let himself take a long, slow sip of his tea. Tommy had frozen, and wasn’t that funny? Wasn’t it interesting, how after a mention of their brother, of time, Tommy had gone still? “About L’manberg,” he clarified to the kid, even though he was absolutely sure that the two of them were on the same page. “Or...Manberg. However it’s called.”

“L’manberg,” Tommy muttered, and was that a curious little note of bitterness there that he picked up on? Sure, Wilbur had talked and talked and *talked* about what had gone on, but it wasn’t like he could delve into Tommy’s psyche for Techno. He had mostly given facts that were tinged in Wilbur-colored bias for Techno to chew on, had given the broadness of his side combined with the specifics of the self. The view of one side versus the other.

L’manberg. Refusing to acknowledge and respect changes made by the new leader of the nation you then had to abandon.

In Wilbur’s crash course on politics, small-server history, and their stakes in it, Techno had come to one realization among many: Governments seemed to be very, *very* flawed. How many people were on that server, anyways?

“I’m not very qualified to try and...admonish you for anything you’ve done. Especially recently,” Techno murmured. Took another sip of his tea after his voice grew hoarse. Even now, his voice turned back and forth between a quiet smoothness and a hoarse, raspy

overtone. “But. I wanted to talk with you about what happened. Ask you about what you did.”

“Where are you going with this, Techno.”

Techno didn’t know. He knew that he wanted to know more, but what was his purpose in it? What made him actually want to breathe in and out and go through all of the things that felt off about the story that Wilbur had told him, that nudged something in his mind that demanded answers above all else?

Why was he pursuing this avenue of questioning rather than trying to uncover more of his memories?

“I want,” he said slowly, gingerly, “to make sure that. Everything is alright. And that you didn’t drop something important to come here.”

Something more important than me. There are a lot of things more important than a husk of a person who doesn’t know who he is, Tommy, and you’ve talked a lot of circles around me about that server.

That ends now. Hopefully.

Did you leave your life behind to stay here and watch a sad excuse of a stranger-not-quite-brother try to match the mold you know?

“Don’t even try to imply,” Tommy hissed, low and quiet and just *this* side of vicious, something that caught Techno off guard in a way that he hadn’t been by Phil’s stillness, by Wilbur’s flat words, “that something’s more important than making sure my *brother* is safe and okay. If I didn’t think you were important, if I just said that you were hopeless I- I-” He just shook his head. “Don’t fucking *talk* like that, Techno. Don’t *think* like that. Fuck.”

“Tommy,” he said, pushing forward and holding his mug firmly, driving right past those statements, “why did you put yourself into a bow duel to the death to decide the fate of a revolution?”

There was a terrible, ungodly amount of weight behind those words. There was a stark harshness to them, to Techno staring Tommy down and asking him why he’d willingly walk to his death against an opponent Wilbur had told him was almost like pre-memory loss Techno in skill, especially with a bow. His mind went back to flashes of insight, to shadows of the past- teaching Tommy the proper way to hold a bow, how to properly bind and fletch arrows, to test that they would fly correctly.

To test that they’d hit their fucking mark.

Why did my teaching fail you? Was I that bad at whatever I had done back then?

What matters to you that much, to throw your life away so willingly when you didn’t grow up in a respawn-set world?

Tommy had clearly done the calculating on what laid behind that question as well. His face was pale, shocked, eyes wide. *Good.* Techno gestured to the tea, stared, and made sure he at least had a good few sips before he allowed Tommy to respond.

“...I had to do it,” he whispered into the quiet, the mug in his hands trembling just as much as Techno’s threatened to do, given enough time. “I had to do it, Techno, *okay?* You wouldn’t understand.” A pause. “You wouldn’t.”

“I won’t understand,” he responded in kind, “I can’t understand any of this, really, unless you. Explain it to me. Did this...*Dream* put you up to it?”

A shadowed figure. An ominous figure, familiar in how it loomed across his current thoughts.

An enemy?

Tommy laughed, that selfsame bitterness shining through yet again as he tipped his head back to stare at the ceiling. He followed his brother’s gaze, found a regular ceiling, and looked back down to see the way his teeth almost tried to bare themselves at nothing. At thin air. “Techno, it’s been almost a *year* since that war happened. Does it really matter?”

“Yes.” *You were a child.*

“No, it doesn’t.” *It happened. Move on.*

“Tommy.” *Tommy.*

“It *doesn’t!*” Tommy sat back up properly, took a defiant sip of the still-hot tea, and glared venom-tipped daggers at him. “That was our place in that world, okay? And Dream- the stupid damn admin- was trying to fucking take that *away* from us! Trying to tear us apart and invalidate where we chose to live and build and stay and he wanted *everything* under his control, even though he has control over the whole fucking world itself! He wanted the land! He wanted my discs! If he would have actually fucking backed down under the results of a duel, I’d have done anything to get him to back off!”

...You did try the duel. You lost. Besides-

“He didn’t have to keep his word, Tommy,” Techno murmured. “If you had won he could have still stormed your place. Burned it down, torn it down block by block, and from. From what Wil tells me, it would’ve been easy.”

“If he really wanted to be a prick, Techno, he could have- *would* have- done that after I gave my most prized possessions to him. I *knew* what I was doing with that duel.”

He hadn’t seen it, hadn’t been there. He hadn’t been there to stare in horror just as Wilbur recounted, there to watch as Tommy fell to the ground and dissolve into the ether after a long, horrifying minute or two.

He hadn’t been there to watch the life drain from Tommy’s eyes.

He wondered if it had truly been worth it.

Sure, he had been revived, saved only by the strange merits of a small server having respawning capabilities. But wasn't Wilbur's shaking hands and broken words and haunted eyes enough to dissuade him from a rash duel? Wasn't Tommy satisfied with a regular fight?

Could it have all been changed if the Techno of the past had pushed training just a bit further, if he had pulled his head out of his ass and went to go help his brothers instead of- instead of farming *potatoes*-

But farming potatoes was the core of who he was. It was understandable that he couldn't be there for months, and that he had been lost for an unknown amount of time afterwards, as time in that place warped and shifted.

But it didn't excuse his behavior. Didn't excuse him not preparing Tommy enough.

It also didn't excuse Tommy's stupid decisions. A *child*, the second-in-command of wartime.

Didn't excuse Wilbur. Didn't excuse Tommy.

He hated this so, so much. Why was he having this talk, again?

Right. Because he loved this rash child.

"You *didn't*," he said roughly, downing the rest of his lavender tea in a few large gulps before wiping at his mouth and locking eyes with this stupid kid. "You *didn't* know what you were doing, Tommy, and we're all to. To blame. I'm to blame. You made a bad decision but I wasn't even able to back you up indirectly."

A pause.

"But you still *endangered yourself*, Tommy," he murmured, and that veil of disappointment, or anger, or *whatever* the hell had colored his voice before was gone. Null and void. Only a quiet thread of devastation weaved through his voice and shone through, something painfully vulnerable and scared. It was enough for Tommy to notice and shut his mouth from whatever argument he had been about to make. "I just wish I knew *why*. I wasn't there. I don't know *why*. But- but- you're my brother. And Wilbur's told me enough that I just want to scream that I couldn't fight the battles that needed to be fought."

He clenched his fists.

"And," he said, voice cracking, continuing on no matter how hoarse and cracked it sounded, "*and*, Tommy, the worst part is that I don't even *want* to fight battles. And I don't remember much, I don't remember so, so much- but I don't think there's any way that if you had fallen there, if you hadn't gotten up- if Wilbur hadn't made it through it all, if you hadn't, if neither of you had, and it was only Phil that could help me- I wouldn't be able to forgive myself for the rest of my life."

Silence fell. Techno couldn't bear to look at Tommy any more, leaning forward and covering his face with his jittering hands. It didn't matter that it left him mildly dizzy, poison still not

having released him from its chokehold of a grip just yet, but he could feel tears rising.

He couldn't cry. He *couldn't*. That just wasn't who he *was*, a part of him deep down murmured, but couldn't Tommy see how much this had affected him?

If things had gone wrong, would Tommy and Wilbur not ever have been there to help him after Phil found him? Would Techno never get to say a proper goodbye? Would he have been a shell of himself, even more than he currently was, and forever be that way?

Would Wilbur and Tommy have...have...

Arms wrapped around him, and Techno felt a choking gasp leave him as his own arms came down, clinging to the person in front of him like a lifeline. Tommy seemed to be on the verge of tears himself, hugging Techno as tightly as he could, and- and-

Both of them were scared shitless at the thought, weren't they?

Techno had failed Tommy. Tommy, in a way, had failed Techno. Had failed himself, even more. Part of a house over, and Wilbur was part of that chain of blame. They were all fuckups, just like how Wilbur also clearly blamed himself for letting Tommy even go into that situation.

Phil, if he ever found out the details that ran through Techno's mind, child-backed revolution and duels to the death and, much later, an exile much harsher than Tommy and Wilbur's honeyed words suggested- he would surely be staring at his hands and wondering what kind of blood was on his own hands from it all.

"I love you," Tommy was mumbling, "I love you, I *swear* I'm not that dumb, I just *had* to, I swear, I'd never do it if I wasn't prepared for the consequences, I wouldn't do it if I could die forever--"

"*Never* throw yourself into something like that again," Techno gasped, holding him close and shaking, shaking, *shaking* himself apart. "Phil needs you. *Wilbur* needs you."

I need you.

(Wilbur curled up in the hallway, side leaning against the door as he listened, as he let his hands stay deathly still in his lap. Phil was busy cleaning out the worst of the monsters that night.)

The moon hung gracefully over the barely cloudy evening, full and luminescent.

Techno and Tommy fell asleep to the gentle scent of lavender, a cloak thrown haphazardly over them both as they sprawled out across Tommy's small bed, whispers to each other about Tommy's stupid decisions long gone quiet.

It was the best sleep Techno had gotten in weeks, even with his inability to totally fit on the bed with Tommy there, too.

He'd keep his family safe. He had to. He had to.

(Perhaps he would make this Dream pay one day for laying a hand on his brother. For murdering him with a shot gone true.

Perhaps. *Perhaps.*)

He *had* to, and that would be something that he would strive for with every broken fucking atom in his body.

Chapter End Notes

this is most likely posted while i'm at work, so hello from past exceed! this was prepped a little early, since i feel so bad that ch12 was posted a bit later than i wanted it to be. i hadn't expected working that day. (edit: i ended up fucking staying home from work because of a shitty stomach fuck this man)

hope everyone's great! if you play ffxiv, happy patch day a few days ago, the story's great! if you don't, well- you're cool too! don't suck your life away with fic and games like me!

is anyone going for a yearly writing goal for 2021? i'm aiming to join a yearround group and work on having a more consistent writing schedule! here's to writing good!

xiv. watch and wait and work until it all falls down

Chapter Summary

With a body able to handle more challenges, Techno tries to decide what course to take in his meandering path of remembering. Wilbur proposes a plan. Phil isn't paid in enough hugs to mediate any arguments.

(Or: It's very easy to unintentionally view something the wrong way after you give an offhand piece of a plan to someone, really.)

Chapter Notes

[chapter title is from "from the ground up" by laura shigihara]

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“What would help me remember?”

Techno tossed a potato up and down, lazily letting it pass back and forth between his hands before he set it down with the pile at his feet. Wilbur sat a few yards away, going over and over the backing to some of his more experimental songs, not singing but instead humming idly along. It was a lazy, quiet day, and he could only be grateful that the passage of another week and a half had let the pain of the strange spider’s bite settle into a dull ache.

Techno hummed flatly, considered the pile of potatoes, and went back to harvest a few more to make the pile a bit bigger before he finished gathering them for the day.

“Mm. Whaddya mean, Techno?”

He looked over to see Wilbur watching him, the strumming of guitar strings gone silent. His brother eyed him for a second, clearly waiting for his answer.

“...What,” he emphasized a bit helplessly, “would help me remember more? It’s...I can’t go forever with memories just being...*triggered* by something, or- or- not everything coming back.”

The context to everything matters, Phil had told him that day on the dock, rain just barely outside of their bubble. *Context, Techno, context*.

He sighed and shook his head, clearly unhappy with his progress. It had been- how long had it been, again, since Phil had found him? A month, maybe a month and a half before Tommy

and Wilbur found out, and at least a month and a half to two and a half months had passed since then- but it could just be his faulty fucking memory.

At least two and a half months, he thought, and I haven't made any progress that's actually remarkable.

"It just feels like something's *stalling* in my head," he muttered, "and I want to remember. I do. But I'm not...the best at retaining information, I guess, and worse at picking what I have. Even with memories. It fucking sucks."

"Hear, hear." Wilbur let his hands move on their own for a bit, slowly letting a thoughtful, pensive melody drift out. Techno knelt down to start gathering the piled potatoes into a heavy duty sack, cloak pushed out of the way so he could work easier. "Any ideas so far from the great Techno?"

"...There's a reason I asked you for help, Wil."

"So...no?"

"....Maybe one or two ideas."

"Hit me with 'em."

Techno let himself fall silent as he crouched down in the dirt, making sure to stack the potatoes neatly in the sack even with their irregular shapes. Dirt had made a home under his fingernails, dark and unstoppable no matter how much he wanted to clean them as he worked. It caked his hands, not *quite* like mud but still annoying enough for him to pause and try to rub some off of his hands.

...He was stalling, wasn't he.

"The first idea," he said, halting and hesitant and almost cringing at the thought, "was to... force myself to remember by, uh, similar stuff to what's helped so far. Stressful situations. Getting sick. Getting nearly hurt. Try and provoke memories that I'd think were important. It's...not all that great," he admitted, and Wilbur gave a soft snort that said *no shit, Techno*. "Try knowing what would be important and how to get yourself in a situation to remember when you've, uh. Already lost those memories."

"Hm. The second?"

"...You're not going to like this one."

"I didn't really like your first one, and there's not much that's totally *worse*. Shoot, potato boy."

"...Um. The second idea, sort of, uh, an offshoot of the first, is to. Um. Have as many near-death experiences and deadly encounters with things like, uh, venomous spiders and zombie hordes. Enough encounters to just shock me into remembering."

The guitar strumming fell absolutely silent. Not even an idle tap on the guitar itself from a fingernail remained.

“You really *weren’t* trying to oversell me on how much I’d hate that one,” Wilbur said, and sounded amazed. Sounded like he was stuck in sheer *awe* at the audacity of Techno’s statement. The lack of music lingered as he clearly tried to process just how *much* he hated it. Techno couldn’t stop the way his face heated up in shame, in belated, terrifying horror.

“We can- move on-”

“Oh, I don’t *think* so,” came Wilbur’s delighted voice, high and chipper and razor-light. Techno risked a glance just to see his eyes boring into his, sharp as a knife. He looked away with a gulp. “You *do* know how idiotic that is, right, brother dearest? Especially after ranting about how Tommy nearly fucked himself over to me before you went to talk to him, or listening to me gush about Dream’s world or just seeing how *worried* we were- and *are-* about you? About that fucking *spider bite*? You *do* know that if you die here, you die *forever*, right?”

“I didn’t intend to actually follow *through* on it,” he muttered. “It was just a thought, it’s stupid, I know-”

“*Clearly* not just a thought.” Wilbur looked like he wanted to continue in on it, shoulders straightened and face set when Techno side-eyed him, but he deflated a second later. “...But that’s not a can of worms that’ll get any better with *my* help, and I know enough about myself to say that. Geez. What a dumb fucking plan.”

“You asked for all my dumb plans, even the ones I knew wouldn’t work. Do *you* have anything better?”

“As a matter of fact, I *do!*” Techno could just hear Wilbur’s shark-tooth grin- and he couldn’t pull that tone between delighted and absolutely furious at his prior statement. *Best to assume delighted*, he thought wryly. “Why don’t you take a tour around the other server you lived in for so much of your life, huh? Hypixel! Experience the sights, the sounds, go back to the stomping grounds you barely remember! Maybe try a few of their fighting games out, the ones you did well on back in the day!”

That thought was almost enough to make him sick. “That’s a *horrible* idea.”

“Not when you’re a backwater small server boy trying to find out who you are in the big city server,” Wilbur said, all honeyed sing-song and false cheer. “It’s sure a hell of a lot better than *nearly dying over and over*, mm? Who knows! You might remember nothing. You might remember *everything!* For all we know, a gentle fucking *knock to your head* could bring it all back!”

He took that as his cue to shut up, for the most part, about how bad an idea he thought it was. *Wasn’t Hypixel the place that had my original farm?*

Techno sighed and started collecting up the potatoes he had dug out, wiping most of the dirt off of them and lugging them back to the pile he had started. “I don’t *want* to fight,” he

murmured, thinking of blood overlaying all the dirt, thinking of a bloodbath that dissipated into stormy air on a dock.

Thinking of blood, death, of body counts and cheers.

“Not a problem!” Wilbur winked. Techno moved faster in his work. “You can just watch some of the matches, huh? Walk around the server a bit and bloom with the attention! It’s basically a huge city, you know- bigger than any of the capitols on the first servers. You lived there, actually, before they opened up their shiny new ‘skyworld’ concept and you moved over there. And eventually farmed potatoes so much that the server thought you were an automaton, or something.”

He was right. Of course it had been his former home. (Maybe he could escape to there, maybe he could retreat, maybe- but no. He was here to stay.)

“...How long had I lived there before that?”

Wilbur hummed. “I mean, it was maybe four years? Six? Somewhere that long ago that you got an actual place. You didn’t live there the first two or three years you frequented it, and *then* you got an apartment, not to mention the fact that you, Phil and I moved here, like, five and a half years ago or something. Hell of a lot of memories to have made in that server. I wasn’t home all the time, sure, but at least I went to more than *one other server* in my life.”

Memories. Memories that all seemed to be related to fighting or whatever he had done there, eating what was probably shitty food or losing (*oh no don’t you ever consider that, what anathema, don’t you dare, Techno never dies he never loses never never never-*) battles with no grace (*no, no losing here, what a faulty, damned memory*) in front of a crowd. He grimaced.

“I don’t particularly want to go there,” he said. “Even...*without* fighting.”

“You asked for *my* ideas,” Wilbur pointed out, “and it’ll probably be better than any more *you* come up with, if your ideas are the whole benchmark. We can even meet with all the people you know there, even if it’s probably better for it to not be in their Sky-based subworld...”

“Squid,” he murmured. Remembered a smirk and a pointed nose and teeth too sharp to be natural, remembered slightly webbed fingers holding a potato.

“Among others.”

Remembered, in half-snippets and brief flashes, the way that blood was a *bitch* to wash off sometimes.

“...I don’t think I want to see them.”

“Do you want your memories back or *not*? ” The music that Wilbur had slowly begun to play again transformed into something annoyed, something ever so slightly grating on the ears with its faster pace. Techno let his flat face grow, somehow, more annoyed in the face of his

mild pettiness. "I'm sure Phil would agree. He'd even leave here for you, you know, like he did before- make sure you're all comfortable, hide you away from the crowds if you need it."

Crowds?

"I don't *need* to be hidden away."

"Then you'd have no problem going there, huh? Especially with that past you hiding all those little clues for your memory to follow in there? Hmm?"

"You're playing dirty," Techno muttered, face growing hot, longer ears twitching downwards.
"You're not supposed to play dirty."

"All's fair in love and war, Techno," Wilbur laughed, lighter now that he clearly thought *something* had been settled, a grin playing across his face like a sunbeam. "Or maybe in love and wanting to beat up your dumb brother."

Techno threw the last potato of the batch at him. Wilbur howled with laughter before he yelped, jolting backwards and huffing when it flew over him.

"Hey, I'm telling Phil that you just tried to *murder me* with a *potato*—"

"Just you try—"

For a moment, he could forget their harsh looks at each other. He could forget their little spat, the way that Wilbur had sharpened when Techno had talked about his plans, the way that they glared and bristled until Wilbur's worry finally manifested into a plan, into something that Techno would admit in his mind wasn't terrible. Wilbur's posture was something strong. Something *unbending*.

All that was left to do was talk to Phil about it. He was all for helping Techno find his memories even under a plan that Techno wasn't completely behind, right?

"Absolutely not."

Techno lurked in the background as Wilbur stared down Phil, who was busy in the kitchen prepping vegetables. He snuck himself a few of the carrots before he hung back further, cloak bunching up around his shoulders as he backed around a corner.

"Just think of it! We don't have to go one iota, one little bit closer to their Sky world than we have to. We take him around, let him see the sights- and weren't you talking to me the other day about how Techno still doesn't have a communicator? We need to get that for him, anyways, and you'd just go to Hypixel for it!"

“Techno,” Phil said softly, “is not supposed to be paraded around at the moment. It was bad enough bringing you two here and having you two overwhelm him with questions and references and triggers for conversation. What do you think a veritable *army* of people would do to him?”

Why were they talking about him like he wasn’t there?

Techno frowned, let his hands gather up bits of his cloak in clenched fists as he stared, stared.

“Come on, Phil! You could come along, make sure everything’s fine, have a chat with the admins if you want...you know how good it could be for him!”

“I am not,” Phil said, “in the right if I just ship my brother off to go have memories thrown at him one after the other. Sure, it’d get some of those back for him, but- but-“

“But?”

“But have you considered that maybe it’s best for it to be slow?”

Silence. Techno didn’t look at them. He leaned his head against a wall, breathed in long and slow, and let the air quietly whistle out through his nose as he listened to their conversation, to the slow, methodical chop of the knife as Phil worked during a chat.

“Maybe,” Phil said, quiet but carrying heavy ice with each syllable, “you should pay a little more attention to Techno.” Chop. “Not every memory is good.” Chop. “Do you just want to shock him into being the person you remember, again?” Chop. “Do you want to make him something he’s not by trying to give back everything at once? Do you-”

“He fucking suggested to my face that he thinks he could get into as many near-death situations as he could to shock the memories back, Phil! Don’t talk to me about what I want!”

Hah. Hahaha. This was a nightmare.

He opened his eyes and looked up, long and slow, to see Phil’s darkened eyes staring straight at him.

“Techno,” Phil whispered, and oh, how he wished to go back to being ignored and talked about as if they didn’t know he were there, “is that true?”

He gulped. Watched as those dark eyes took in the silent admission and the corners of his gaze crinkled.

“I’m going to need that said out loud.”

Would running be an acceptable answer?

Techno looked to Wilbur. He looked strong, unbending, unbreakable. *Righteous*. Maybe he *should* have been afraid of that unshakable frame as they walked into the house.

At least Tommy was off and out of the house tending to his bees.

"I- I don't—" Techno paused to take a deep breath, to settle himself, to calm his shaking hands. "Yes," he said, and valiantly kept going. "Yes, I said that, and I just- I need to remember if I want to be the person you remember, or to be the person who remembers the person you remember, and so many of the- the- the holes lead to that server—"

"Techno, you don't have to act like recovering what was lost is a race."

They were on him now, huh, and not at- at- ugh.

"I'm. It. It's not like it's a race," he said, hands clenched even tighter into fists as he frowned at the two of them. "This- I just have to figure out more things about myself. And. I remembered a lot because of that- that stupid venom. I think. I just thought it was a good. Good idea."

"I'm not risking you dying, Techno, to get back your memories! Is that- did you *let* that spider—"

"No!" He bared his teeth slightly as he glared, as the ache in his arm momentarily flared into a sharp pain. "I didn't let it get me, it was a mistake, and, by the way, I wasn't- wasn't for the idea of going to the server! It's not like I remember much good about it!"

Phil's face shifted a bit into an emotion that wasn't quite shock, wasn't quite knowing. He paused to frown before he shook his head, looking for all the world like something was clicking in his head about it rather than in Techno's.

"...What do you remember about it?"

Wilbur was tentative, looking for all the world like he hadn't been the unbending figure he had shown to them moments previous. He looked- not nervous. Not quite. He looked simply worried.

"Blood," he said, biting enough to make them both flinch back with his now rasping tone. "More than blood. Fighting. *Winning*. Techno never dies."

"Anything...anything else?"

"*Techno never dies*," he repeated, dark and dull, letting his cloak more fully cover him as he glared at the two. He wanted to leave. Techno didn't- he didn't want this almost *interrogation*. The hybrid just wanted a way to recover his memories quicker.

If anything, Phil's face grew a little paler at the phrase. He looked at Wilbur.

"He needs a communicator," Wilbur repeated, and a note of victory threaded through his voice. "He needs a communicator, Phil, and we can all go with him, if you want. Show him his apartment. Maybe a place or two he liked to go to for food. Stay there a few weeks, even if it's not to go and fight and shit, okay?"

"I don't like this."

“Can you think of anything else to get to what he wants, huh? Not a race, fuckin’ sure, but do you want him getting into shit here, where he could die if he goes through with his idea and we aren’t there, or- or go to Hypixel where he *can’t*? ”

“I don’t like this.”

“What else is there? How else can we get him what he wants? It isn’t as if we’d be anywhere and everywhere in there. We’d be able to come back if we wanted. He has an apartment there, we can get the admins to check in on it and make sure it’s all fine before we go! It’ll be fine!”

“Wilbur,” Phil said, voice saturated with a *doneness* that startled them both, “you’re making decisions for your brother. I get it. I really do. But I don’t like the fact that you’re just... you’re just...” He waved an arm out. “Just let Techno speak, Wil.”

Both pairs of eyes looked to him. He bristled, almost ready to snap out, but didn’t say anything for a long moment.

“Techno- please. You’ve heard his argument. We know part of yours. I’m not the biggest fan of it, but...but...there is a point. There’s a lot of your life spent there.” Phil paused. “Parts we don’t know about either, I think. If you go there...not everything’s going to be what you want, okay?”

Phil looked at Wilbur. Wilbur stared straight at Techno. Phil...Phil sighed.

“Not everything’s going to be what you expect,” he finished quietly. “If you go, you’re at least taking Wil and Tommy with you. I’ll have to check to see if the server’ll like me going if you decide to go.”

“I want to find out more of my- my memories-”

“Then go,” Wilbur snapped, torn from a righteousness and gone into a spark of a fire, “Just go with us, *gods*, you’re so-”

“I’m so *what*? ”

“You’re so irritating! I love you, I fucking love you to death but you have this big great chance to go and remember so much in front of you that you’re just not taking! You can be so- so daft sometimes!”

“If I go,” Techno said, past caring the way that his throat scraped at his voice and left it a mauled beast crawling out of his mouth, “will I hate who I find? Will I- I- despise what I once was?”

“You’ll never find out if you don’t go! You’ll just be a fucking coward for the rest of your life!”

“Boys!”

Techno’s hands curled, almost as if he wanted to grasp for a weapon, to lunge forwards and choke Wilbur out and go for blood but- but no. That wasn’t...a good instinct. He stopped

baring his teeth, stepped back, let his shoulders hunch more over his frame.

"Boys," Phil said, softer this time. "I don't...you can't yell at each other like this. Wilbur, there are lines that you're so fucking dangerously close to crossing. You know what they are. Techno- nobody's forcing you to do anything, but...you can't judge yourself until you've seen it all. I know you're hesitant, and I also know you...you want to know that part of yourself. Just...you don't have to go it alone, Techno, whatever you do."

"I'll go," he said, and stopped himself from baring his teeth and tusks again at the way that victory filtered into Wilbur's eyes. "I'll- go. And I'll. Go with you and Tommy. At least. It'll be...a fun time."

A fun time in a world that he only remembered in half-snaps and of walking along brightly lit corridors. A fun time in a world that he associated with blood on his hands, with a rush of adrenaline.

A fun time.

As he turned to leave, he bared his teeth again, angry and furious at Phil, at Wilbur, at everyone. At himself.

They'd see. They'd either regret it or they wouldn't, letting him go to this, server, part of him tugging at an invisible leash to go and see and maybe talk to people his mind half-remembered- but another part shied further away, screaming at having to enter a land of blood and sweat and tears and-

"Techno?"

"Mm?"

"How're you doing? You've...have you been through a rough time, recently?"

"...What makes you think that?"

"...You end your fights quicker than you already do. Crow a little less. Leave before it's all said and done."

"I think I'd like to talk about something else, Teach."

"Hah. Fair enough. Oh- you missed that stitch, unpick that, it'll mess up the sequence if you don't do that now-"

Tommy was fucking thrilled that they'd go to Hypixel together. Of course.

Techno watched as he excitedly texted his friend- maybe they'd go out and do something while he was adjusting, he didn't know.

Wilbur was smug. He couldn't stand being around him like that, so he left to go stare at Phil, who looked a bit more put upon with every day that inched closer to when they were aiming to go.

He drank a lot of tea in that week or two of waiting. A lot of lavender tea.

"I can't go with you all," Phil explained to him one evening, strange text floating in the air almost akin to the type of communicators that Wilbur and Tommy used. His smile was a bit tired, a bit sad as he stared at the script, and he explained at Techno's confused look.

"So it's, uh, something they taught us in the little certification program I went in- if you don't want your server to go inactive and have the life in it pause, you need someone in it for a majority of the time. And I want things to keep going, you know? Stasis can cause. Problems. As we know. The admin's presence is the most important, and I was gone for a bit under a month, checking different servers for you."

"So.."

"So if I want to keep things functioning the way they are, I can't spend more than another three or four days outside of this server for another few months," Phil sighed. "I could visit you over in Hypixel, but...I'd rather save it for an emergency, you know? This world's like... my child."

He did not know. He did not understand.

Techno stared dubiously at Phil and kept sipping his lavender tea.

"All boring admin stuff, just- can't go with you guys. But I'll call every day, okay? We can all have a good chat, update me on what's going on, I can tell you how your potatoes are doing..."

With every day that approached the date when they had all decided on the trio going- Techno only agreeing under extreme duress, he let it be known multiple times- the line of Techno's shoulders grew tighter, the creases by his eyes became more prominent, the furrow in his brow deepened.

He drank more and more and *more* lavender tea as the date approached, enough to make Phil stop and stare when he went back for what had to be the millionth mug. Blame his past self- the tea was supposed to be *calming*, a notebook from long ago told him in his own handwriting, complete with slightly sophisticated chicken scratch and all. Something for when he was angry. Stressed. Worried. *Put in as much honey as you think you need*, it said.

Gods know you need it. I need it. Whatever. Just make sure to get the amount of lavender right...

Of course he drank it multiple times a day. When wasn't he in need of something calming, when dealing with his family, with his memories, with his life?

At least it worked. (Somewhat.)

On the day they left, he brought a thermos of the stuff. The only thermos in the house- Phil's. He didn't care that he took it. That was what he deserved for shipping him along with Wilbur and Tommy, who both looked too excited for the occasion.

Off they went into the wild that seemed to be Hypixel, he supposed.

They were swept away from waypoint to waypoint, and all he could taste was lavender.

Chapter End Notes

[important! please read ^^]

bad news, i think, although in the end, once this is done, it'll be better for those who read it.

upon going through what i have for the next section, i've felt very- discontent with what i had, and have done a complete rework of the outline for a good part of the story, and so i have to rewrite the chapters i've already completed. if i had edited what i had for it and given it to you i couldn't've forgiven myself. so for now, this work will be put on a soft pause as i build up enough of a backlog to feel comfortable posting again. to keep updated, please join the discord to see fun, exclusive snippets, see some cool people, and hang out with me as i try not to spiral because i'm not updating consistently anymore. :)

if everything goes well, it won't be a crazy long time until i post again! just...i ask that you all be patient. i sincerely apologize.

...i think that in the end the rework might add, uh. ten to thirty thousand extra words over what i had already planned? so. that'll be fun!

again, you can find me primarily in the discord that is in the end end notes. thanks. i'd update as i got chapters done but i...don't want to burn out. <3

important important update, 1/7/2021

currently am ~45k words into the next part of the fic, which is an almost total rewrite of the next arc :) will update later with a more accurate estimate of when updates will start again, but the arc will be at LEAST 50k words in total, possibly ~60k or further!

o/

UPDATE 2/1: HEY THERE'S A NEW CHAPTER NOW, PREVIOUS NOTES KEPT FOR POSTERITY

xv. bare-faced at your masquerade

Chapter Summary

Techno finds himself in a world of lights and movement, and his brothers are his only anchors. Wilbur and Tommy realize that they've forgotten to tell Techno everything that needs to be known. Sometimes, a home never ended up becoming a real home.

(Or: Perhaps there was a reason he was ferried around for so many meetings after Phil pulled him out of that island.)

Chapter Notes

[chapter title from "warsaw" by dessa]

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

"I don't like this place," Techno said not even half a minute after they stepped out of the waypoint's exit. He took in the sights and the sounds, wide-eyed and staring at the bright lights and sounds around him, the giant billboards advertising different entertainments for visitors to attend even as others talked about cafes, about restaurants, about the fact that free housing would be given to the winner of this or that game if they were top of the leaderboards of the month- and felt like he could barely breathe. "It's. Loud."

It struck him that this must have been part of the place that Phil had dragged him through, delirious and still clinging to the fact that he had been taken away from his life in the potato fields. Maybe it had been a bit quieter- some space more geared towards the backend running of the server, some place for meetings and business and correcting bugs with its own separate waypoint system- but that had been bright and flashy, too.

It was overwhelming. Before, he could very easily...dissociate and chill out. Now, he had no chance but to take it all in and shrink under the sparkles and the flash. He tugged the jacket he was wearing over his shoulders more firmly, unable to pay proper attention to it all, feeling like the fact that his cloak was in his bag gave him a distinct lack of a shield.

A distinct lack of protection.

Wait- come to think of it, were people looking at him weirdly?

"Come on," Wilbur said, sniffing and turning up his nose as they walked forwards. "Let's at least get you to where your place is and then we can go from there."

“...I have a place here?”

Tommy, who was just ahead of them, turned to give Techno a look. “Of course you have a place here, Techno. We’ve talked about it with you, you know? Like, you have the place. So people don’t. Crowd you.”

Crowd you?

What the *fuck*?

At his look of confusion, Tommy slowly turned to Wilbur, face grave and dark. “...Did you not. Tell him.”

Wilbur seemed to have that same realization flood into his eyes as Techno glanced over. There was a paleness to him, something even whiter than before, something more than a bit regretful. “Oh. Uh. That would have been a good idea, huh?”

“...It’s like you two are speaking a different language.”

“Let’s hurry along now,” Wilbur said quickly, taking Techno by the hand as Tommy moved back to grab his other one. They started dragging him along, fast enough that he almost lost his footing before he adjusted to the pace. “It’s not too far, especially if you use a local waypoint, I love their great, amazing, stellar, robust system...”

He could hear people speaking around him- faint, but his larger ears picked it up, twitching ever so slightly.

Is that Techno?

No, that’s just a cosplayer, you know he’s moved to the Sky subsystem, don’t be silly-

Hey, who’s Techno?

Is that-

Wow, what a good cosplay! If only they got the crown and the cape, then you wouldn’t even be able to tell...

They ushered him along quicker, although to a glance it didn’t seem like they were in a hurry. Techno, for his part, was simply full of such a deep well of confusion that he may as well be drowning.

“What’s. Goin’ on.”

“So, uh, big T. Brother of mine. Big man.” Tommy’s laugh was the kind of high-pitched that Techno had only seen him create with pure stress, light and airy and ready for him to bolt. That. Didn’t bode well. “Uh, you’re maybe famous?”

“*What?*”

“So you’re tellin’ me...I was known for being good. At the most popular form of entertainment here.”

They stood in the foyer of what seemed to be an expansive apartment, shining white and expensive-looking wood and marble accents everywhere, threaded throughout with a kind of rose-gold.

This isn’t anything like a home, he thought as he looked it over, tried to take in two different experiences at once. This can’t be any sort of a home to anyone.

“The *best*,” Tommy chirped. Techno pinched the bridge of his nose tightly breathed in, and let it out with a long sigh.

“I was known for being the *best*, then” he corrected, “and so everybody knows me by every little bit of my appearance. And...my cloak.”

He stepped further into the area, noting the opulence, the splendor, the fact that half of the chairs seemed designed to hurt someone and the other half seemed to just be very nice-looking and plush furnishings.

Wilbur immediately jumped down onto the hellishly large couch. Techno didn’t follow suit. Tommy stayed glued to his side, vibrating with apologetic energy.

“I mean, you were known for having a crown, too, and you didn’t have either of those on? I mean, people do like to dress as you.” Tommy scratched at his head sheepishly. “And dye their hair pink, or get wigs or whatever.”

“...Tommy.”

“I’m not kidding! I mean, it’s dropped off recently, you know? At least, that’s what I’ve heard. All because of that whole ‘vanishing to farm potatoes’ thing, and even before that—during the actual war, you mostly stuck to that island, so you were sort of like a cryptid....but before that, you were the big name around here! Still are, sort of!”

“Before that...” he prompted, eyebrows raising.

“You maybe got top marks in half of the competitions, became a well known face and got even more famous because you were, uh...down to earth? If I remember correctly? And weren’t exactly approachable. So there was that whole myst- mist-”

“*Mystique*,” Wilbur said helpfully from where he was reclining on the couch, that looked far too nice for his dumb sweater and beanie and...him, despite being one of the more sensible looking seats in the place. “That’s what it is.”

“Thank you. *Mystique*,” Tommy corrected himself. “And we were happy for you, but, uh. You didn’t like it.”

“I wonder why.” Techno’s voice was as dry as the desert. He watched as Wilbur and Tommy visibly grew more nervous. “You know, it would have maybe been a good idea to, I don’t know...tell me that I’m famous? When I already didn’t want to go here because of how many people there’d be?”

“Hopefully they’ll just think you’re a crazy accurate cosplayer,” Wilbur chirped, flashing him a grin. He shot it down with one of his eyebrows going a tiny bit higher. “Geez, geez, okay. I get it. I’m sorry, okay? We sort of...forgot.”

“Really.”

“...We don’t exactly frequent this server.”

He grunted and looked away to survey the room more, now that he wasn’t absolutely dedicated to being absolutely and utterly unimpressed by their antics. It was far, *far* nicer than he deserved. Far nicer than he was comfortable with. Long panels of glass looked out onto the city below, a beautiful shell, a lovely place to entertain people. He thought he could almost think of it, could almost taste the atmosphere it could create- the set to his shoulders as rigid as it was now, staring down people of importance to Hypixel that wanted to give him sponsorships, or who could give him favors.

I could make sure that you’d be on the fast track for private server licenses. Admin teaching, you know, he thought he could hear, not from here but from a time when he was younger, face guarded with ferocity and caution instead of boredom. Something that made his fists clench to even hear an echo of whatever *that* was. *You’re quite the star.*

Talk to me when I’ve gotten a better winstreak than this shit.

Language, language. You know how to treat potential sponsors, don’t you?

Techno shook his head, let the memory escape him, and ventured out of the living room, out of the too-large space and gold-veined marble and past the expansive, well-maintained kitchen. What a waste of time and money and space that was clearly just used for entertaining very, *very* rare visitors to this...this hellish, clean *purgatory*.

Memories could wait until he saw where the fuck everything was. He opened a door- nope, that was a bathroom with fogged windows and the highest of commodities, another door at its back end. He closed it and moved on. It was obvious that Wilbur and Tommy were watching, clearly able to see his methodical path through the apartment (even if it seemed as large as Phil’s house, if not larger), but he paid it no mind and opened another door.

Gods.

...Nobody needed a whole fucking...*walk in wine cooler*. For just wine. And absolutely nothing else. *Every row was stocked.*

Actually, now that he thought about it, maybe he did need all this wine. It seemed that he would sure as hell want a bottle of wine after enduring whatever this too-large, too-bright city had to offer in the past, and it wasn't like Tommy had to have been there most of the time. The Techno of the past had to have made use of this, if he was alone and living somewhere like this. (Hah. As if he could presume what the past him would have wanted.)

He had to stop himself from seriously considering bringing a bottle or two out- but there was a teenager. An older teenager, but still a minor, and he didn't want to see Tommy drink anything alcoholic. Nope. Moving on.

...Oh, thank *fuck*. At least where he slept actually looked lived in, even if the bed was well made, even if it was far cleaner than his room at Phil's had become over the past few months.

He breathed in. The faintest smell of lavender hit him, and it was so surprising how it just made him relax. Holy hell, it was close to the thought of coming home.

Now this room- *this* had been his home.

He considered what hung on a wall across from him- a splash of crimson red, the same kind of red as the cloak he wore now, but...clearly imbued with something *more* in it, even from the way it sat. Techno strode up, ignoring the bed that looked too simple to match the rest of the apartment, the desk that looked rough and worn, the beanbag on the floor that had seen better days, and approached the hanging cloth.

(He ignored the swords, axes, and bows on other parts of the wall, or the kits clearly meant to maintain them. He ignored the wardrobe, one door partially open to reveal a haphazard mix of fine clothing and the kind of things he had at Phil's, half of it bundled up and paired with old bags of lavender. Ignored how there was an unwritten letter on the desk, a pen uncapped next to it.)

He took one edge of the cloak and flipped it around as if on instinct to stare at tiny bits of embroidery on the inside, barely noticeable except for how they shimmered at a very careful angle. If he focused enough on making them stand out from that underlining of fabric, runes started to take shape.

It felt, for a second, as if the cloak in his bag should have had the same symbols.

Even though Techno had forgotten exactly what they meant, still didn't remember even when they stared him straight in the face, it was clear that they *screamed* with power. Enough energy to make him freeze and stare and wonder what exactly what they said- but the energy spoke enough that he didn't have to know the specifics.

Protection. Protection. Protection.

"You insisted on getting someone to do the final touches to that one yourself."

He spun around to see Wilbur slouched in the doorway, a small smile on his face. Beyond that, Tommy appeared preoccupied with staring out the window, communicator taking pictures before he furiously typed on it.

“...Not Phil? Not you?” *Not me?* Something sounded...*wrong* with what Wilbur was saying. Something fundamental was just...off about it.

“He didn’t have the knowledge of how to imbue clothing with enchantments,” Wilbur said, and was that a hint of awe in his voice? “I mean, not many people do at all. That’s something usually reserved for, like...secretive masters of a craft, and they only take special commissions. Getting someone to do it for you- man, you even got someone to do a few things for us, and I don’t even know how much that would have cost. They’re hermits of a different breed, Techno.”

He walked up next to him and tilted his head to get a better look at the cloak. “Armor’s easy to enchant regularly for anyone,” Techno murmured almost as if to himself, rubbing his thumb over the very subtle raised edge of the embroidery. “Weapons are easy, too. Everything else is next to impossible.”

“I think Phil cried when he saw the final cloak for the first time.” Wilbur nodded at the cloak, as if it weren’t obvious what he was talking about. “Bawled somethin’ about being proud that you could go and contact one of those masters for yourself. I think all of us were in shock the whole day or something, since it wasn’t like you talked much about exactly how well you were doing here. More than enough to provide for yourself and...a lot of others.”

In his heart of hearts, in the rhythm that beat constantly in his soul, this stitching screamed *my handiwork, my handiwork, mine. I did this. This is mine. Some part of me remembers the long process of stitching this in, stitch by scarlet stitch.*

...But who the hell had taught him?

The thought ate at him, at the glimpses he had seen before of thread and stitching and an unreadable visage, but he put the cloak back with an idle, discontented hum to go and explore the rest of his room. The thought didn’t release him from its grip, simply lurked at the back of his mind (would he ever get that knowledge back? Would he? Would he remember whoever taught him and why nobody knew? Why the embroidery was so hidden unless you looked for it and were close enough to run your fingers over the threads?) as he moved about.

He could just...put a pin in it. *There.* He could obsess over it later.

“Seems like I only really used this room,” he said, voice clearly awkward as he stared around. “...What else is in this place?”

“Well...” Wilbur hummed. “There’s the bathroom which you already saw, the cool as hell wine cooler- hah, you’ve given us some of the bottles in it before, it’s the good stuff-”

“There’s the kitchen and living room that you already saw, but they’re basically the same room,” Tommy called out, and Techno turned to see him waving with both arms and grinning impishly. “All that ‘open space’ and shit that people love on television. You told me once that you didn’t have a proper dining table or a dining room because you wanted to make people who weren’t friends uncomfortable,” he declared, “so you just fuckin’ used...the coffee table or that island counter for meals. Even the important ones. Hilarious.”

“I’m...sure.”

“And oh, oh- Wilbur, I’m taking over-”

“Go ahead, brat-”

“We haven’t been here in a while, like, *obviously*, but still. Down this dumb as hell hallway is, uh- a few guest rooms, mostly for when we came over or when someone you knew visited, which...I have no clue who you knew or would have known here. This way, there’s a private waypoint to these, like, hot springs imitations and a few other places? It’s weird. There’s private springs and public ones there, but it’s probably not great to go there, uh, considering everything? Creepy as hell sometimes. I don’t like it.”

“You went there once, Tommy. ‘S your fault you didn’t beeline for the private springs.’”

“Wil, you- you just shut *up*, alright-”

Techno hummed and let himself drift behind Tommy, peering in each room that was opened. Indeed, the first few appeared to be bedrooms while there was some kind of odd kind of closet with a terminal through one door. The next was a bathroom, almost like the master bathroom that connected to the living room and his own room. Next-

“*Oh*,” he breathed.

This was. A lot.

“‘Oh’ is right, big man,” Tommy said, nodding eagerly as the door was properly opened for the room at the end of the hallway. “I mean, the other ones we passed were either storage or some boring shit, but this? *This* is the coolest bit.”

It was also the only place that seemed like it had been used more than once or twice besides his bedroom and (sort of) the master bathroom. It was a training room, something that tried to tug back memories almost instantly, flash after lightning flash- all boring, all just training, running on the treadmill he saw tucked into a corner or sitting on the floor eating *microwaved noodles* of all things or running through sword techniques on an open spot on the floor-

This was where he trained to get better at fighting. (*At killing.*) At winning.

“If there was one place where the admins and your sponsors- you had sponsors, right?- wanted to make sure was good for you, well...” Wilbur, who came up next to him, gestured at the space. “Pretty cool, but. It’s sorta fucked, isn’t it? Paying for all of this just so you earn them more money. Bet you they’ve made the money of this thousands of times over just by product shit or you winning tournaments in their name or whatever. I remember seeing you in an ad or two, once, I think.”

And that was something Phil hadn’t mentioned, either. Tournaments. *Sponsors*. Whatever hell of a culture was formed by raising up those who were good at these games of blood and bone and having them be *celebrities*.

His skin crawled. Maybe this *should* have been something he hadn't budged on, actually. Maybe it was the worst idea in the world. *Fuck.*

But Phil's words came back to him, even now: *I think you just never wanted to lose. Never wanted to lose and end up losing again later; when it mattered the most.*

What had living like this *been* for even beyond that, though? It hounded him just like the mystery of that superior cloak, that *complete* cloak did. How did living like this benefit him instead of staying in more humble accommodations, instead of refusing sponsors, refusing any who wanted to benefit off of him and just- keeping on going winning tournaments? Why did he have to be such a public figure?

He had come here to find answers. So far, he was only gaining more and more questions, enough that they were pouring themselves liberally out of his throat and dragging each little thought out of his body to silently hang in the air.

Why couldn't he have stayed with Phil? Why was he- why did he have to be *here*, instead?

He took a deep breath, spun around on a dime, and resolved to ignore it for now. Better things would come. Memories would arrive. At some point in the future, he could finally fit all of the horrible, wonderful puzzle pieces together and build a monstrosity of a life back up from his cracked foundations.

"I'm tired," he said slowly, clearly. "Pick...whatever rooms you usually have. I guess. I'm going to go...figure out how the shower works and then sleep. Do whatever you want. This is. Sure something."

"Hey, hey, Techno-"

"...What is it, Tommy?"

"Want me to make some honey milk for you to have once you're out?"

"For the *last time*—"

"*Honeyed* milk, yeah, yeah, whatever—"

"If there's any around, sure. Who would keep this place stocked for someone gone for years?"

"Good thing we told the admins we were coming, then," Wilbur said, and Techno turned a searching, haunted gaze back onto him. "What? I mean, like, they *know* you. You knew them. Maybe they'll pop over and say hi if you're fine with it later. They just...stocked it up with what the server data told them you had most often here, I'm pretty sure."

How...invasive.

He'd despair if he found that everything in the kitchen was something he liked.

"Found it," Tommy hollered, and Techno could just *feel* a stress headache coming on.

He did the only thing any sane person would do: immediately abscond to his room to grab sleep clothes before hiding away in the bathroom to take a long, warm shower.

Techno turned the knob on, hair finally free from its loose braid-

(Wait, no, that was too cold, holy shit, holy SHIT-)

“Why are you teaching me this, anyways?”

Techno watched as the only other person in the room hummed and flipped through a few pieces of paper. It was another moment before they shook their head, sighed, and brought out an embroidery hoop, motioning him closer.

“Because you look like you could do some good in the world,” they said, a kind of softness in their voice that spoke of exhaustion and a quiet sort of sadness.

“But I’m...*me*. ”

“You’re you,” they agreed, “but what does that mean? Does it mean that you’re whoever you believe you are? How the *masses* believe you are? How your *family* believes you are?” They waved a hand and laughed before pointing at the embroidery hoop. “Now, pay attention- if you want any enchantment to have even a chance to bind, evenly spacing this rune among the set is crucial...”

“You could do great things, kid.” A man leaned out over a railing, framed by the harsh lights of the city, and Techno followed suit, hesitation grabbing at him and slowing his steps.

“Change this world just by a movement of your hand, by a twitch of your lips, by a short-spoken endorsement. By what you do. But you wouldn’t do it for just anything, huh?”

Techno stayed silent.

“Mm, I was told you weren’t much of a talker. That’s fine, that’s fine, all the newbies are shy- although it’s not like you’re a newbie, not really. But what if I said I had an offer for you? Something that you could only hope to reach once in a lifetime, maybe never if the fates didn’t align? The power to shape worlds even beyond this one?”

One beat. Two.

“*Work with me*, here. In the future, even, you could get your own admin in your retinue, you could speak with the greatest of the greats...”

Silence.

“Kid-”

“...What about VIP privileges for others? In-server protection...?”

“...Now you’re speakin’ my language. Maybe a year or two down the road, if you keep performin’ the way you’re doin’, we’ll make you even more of a star than you’re becomin’...”

“And the winner is...Techno!”

He stood, coated in blood and gore and pieces of every person he had come across. On the feed, on broadcast, it had to be at least somewhat presentable- the work of skilled admins-in-training carefully manipulating the data, plucking out what was too much before sending the footage on its way even past a glass barrier to those watching ‘in person’. He looked at the indistinguishable faces of the crowd, back down at himself, and closed his eyes.

He’d make sure they all knew his name, before his life here was over and done with.

This is for them. This is all for them.

“Techno! You’ve been in there a while, need anything?”

Water beat unevenly on his back as he stood there, water turned almost to scalding as he stood still underneath it. Too hot was better than too cold, the scars littering his body hissing with discontent, hair not even washed- but- that-

He already had a feeling that he’d hate Hypixel.

Fame. Fortune. Behind the scenes dealmaking.

Techno didn’t throw up, but it was close.

“No- No! I’m. Fine.”

“Night, Techno!”

“...Night.”

No tears slipped out. Nothing.

After the shower, he moved to his bedroom to stare at the cloak, moved to the wardrobe to see various, less powerful enchantments stitched into half of the clothes, thread barely visible even close up.

Hide, most of them gave off an air of, all stitched in comfy, unobtrusive wear. *Hidden, unnoticed, protect.*

Nothing of the finer wear had any stitching.

Questions, questions, *questions*. There were always so many fucking *questions* he wanted to know the answers to, always more popping up when he got answers, he couldn't think-

Techno barely got any sleep that night.

Chapter End Notes

the hypixel arc ran away from me...

welcome back to snapshots, and strap in for the long ride. we're back to chapters, baby.
i'm settling into maybe taking care of myself a little more- so for now, we're at a
schedule of updating every ~four days or so. just keep an eye out. updates will be
regular for a while yet, and i have a buffer ready.

apologies for the wait. i was very dissatisfied with my original writing for this segment,
and it had a major overhaul. thank you for your patience! we're now into a sort of
different vibe, although it carries a lot of energy over. be prepared for my meandering
worldbuilding and thoughts on what goes on!

i don't know what else to say, so i shall just say that i hope yall have been well, and to
have a lovely day. night. whatever.

xvi. the magpie will have his way

Chapter Summary

Techno sorts through the knickknacks that tell the story of his life. A figure from the past gives dubious financial advice. Wilbur forgets how to tell time, despite his many years of experience doing so.

(Or: A garment meant for protection doesn't exactly stand for much when the danger's already inside of you.)

Chapter Notes

[chapter title from "magpie" by the mountain goats]

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

This place was new. This place was *strange*.

New- but not quite *new*, not with how letting his fingers brushing against the foreign objects he found soothed him with their familiar- but not too familiar- textures. The memories held within every square inch of the apartment giggled at him, skirted around the edges of his mind and refused to actually grant him whatever they held within. They teased and poked and prodded almost beyond repair and Techno could only *groan* from where he laid on his bed in a vague half-awake state, the heels of his palms pressing at his eyes in a tired anger.

The haze of morning was reluctant to go. The room stayed cast in near-complete darkness thanks to the deep black curtains pulled across the length of the open wall, the neon lights and the sheer life of the city too scared to even properly peer in and bathe Techno in the light of advertisements and neon lights from dusk to dawn.

He hated the necessity, even as his vision thanked him for it.

Sleep still clouded his eyes, reluctant to leave and let him properly wake up. Techno stretched slowly before he let his arms fall to his sides. Took one slow breath in before letting it out, dragging himself out of bed with all of the excitement of someone that thought they were walking quite surely to their own demise.

Shit-fuck-ow. That was something relatively pointy on the ground that he just stubbed his toe on.

Pitch blackness was the *worst* for waking up properly.

Somehow, though, despite it all, despite the pulsing of his hurt foot and the softness of the rug under his feet and the strong desire to flop back into the bed, Techno managed to make it to the curtains and painstakingly drag them open. He yawned and rubbed at his eyes, shielded them afterwards with a hand when the light outside made him flinch-

What time even *was* it? It looked exactly the same as when he had gone to sleep. It looked exactly the same as when they had actually entered the server, slowly shifting colors and all.

It wasn't even like Techno had anything to check the time with.

Fuck this, he decided, and just left the curtains open so that the light of the city could come in and illuminate his room.

Come to think of it, maybe the city's lights were the reason that there seemed to be no overhead light at all, only a lamp on the nearby desk to light up the room any further. Why bother with many lights when all you needed to do if you had a large enough set of windows was to draw open the curtains?

He stretched. Groaned. Time crawled on at a perilously slow pace, and he couldn't hear any indication at all that his brothers were outside the door and off in the living room. Each second that passed was another that the sleep slowly lifted off of him, leaving him blearily looking around and just...observing and drinking in that which he was too overwhelmed to look at the night before.

The cloak- the cloak was, quite simply, avoided. He refused to look at it again just yet, refused to look at that piece of clothing whose purpose was to purely *protect* whoever wore it through thick and thin, through anything that anyone could throw at it, runes that he didn't understand giving off just as much energy as any of the enchanted pieces of armor or weapons back at Phil's. Back at home.

Instead of the important, more grand-looking items around, Techno found himself picking over the little things, almost like a little magpie that eyed anything even remotely interesting to put it in its nest. A trinket here, a feeling there. He curled his toes into the rug and tried to imagine that it was anywhere near comparable to the grass back at home.

Slowly, he gathered a small collection of things that sparked some interest: First, a little... stick with buttons on it. Second, a pincushion. Third was the most fascinating of them all- what looked like a very fancy, ornate fountain pen stuck in a pen holder and lumped in with all the other, shittier pens that he had picked up, once upon a time.

Fourth, fifth, sixth- well. There were too many little bits and pieces of interesting things. A post-it note. A scribbled diagram that made no sense. A pin.

But what, in life, what held the most importance?

What gave the most *context* to a recovering amnesiac, hell-bent on discovering who they used to be?

Techno sat in a creaky but comfortable chair in front of the desk and considered the small pile that wasn't even large enough to think about spilling over the surface. Pens. Pincushion. Stick. Other things. Upon closer inspection, the stick looked closely related to the remote Phil used for the television at his house- but when he looked around, no console for a television seemed to be available.

...Huh.

Moving on. He had a goal to accomplish, even in the lengthy, confused way that he was doing so.

There was an eerie nature in exploring the past in the exact way he was trying to do, all bumbling and awkward in its slow sincerity. It was almost like he was an archaeologist in some of the shows Phil had on in the background sometimes over the past few months, of young people venturing to the very first servers and uncovering the bones of stories tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands of years old nonchalantly coexisting among the lives of the server's currently thriving civilizations.

He was uncovering what had been left to gather dust, and it was impossible to know until it was all in view whether it had been covered up for a reason or not.

Techno sifted through a mire of conflicted feelings, conflicted thoughts, conflicted memories as he picked through the little things. The pincushion, all rough fabric and hand-sewn with a recognizable lavender scent, brought to mind pinning shreds of fabric together, sewing it with a slow but steady hand as conversation passed over him. Only a few pins rested in it now, but he took one out to consider it in the light.

Gave himself a slight poke.

Ah- still sharp. He watched as a little point of blood welled up on his arm before he passed a thumb over it and watched the red disappear.

He put the pin back in the pincushion.

The pen...he couldn't look at the pen for long. It made him uncomfortable, he realized after a long, hard stare- almost like that past self of his had hated it with every trembling fiber of his being, hadn't ever wanted to pick it up and waste its finery- or hated what it was used for. In some odd way it made Techno feel *slimy*- and so he moved on from it with a heart that was beating faster than before, racing for just a few seconds before his ever-so-slightly shaking hands picked up a metal pin, discarded it, went for a pin of a different color to examine in the blurred light of the outside world. He couldn't identify with any confidence what color it was meant to be.

Sign right here, his mind belatedly murmured, its gentle touch trapping him before he realized what it was referencing- mind still half on the fucking pen. *Right on the dotted line, there's a man. We look forward to working with you, Techno. Such a rising star, you know- big name in the industry.*

Sign right there, yes, there, that's done! First big public sponsorship with us- you're makin' the big moves now, you know, up into the big leagues and makin' more relationships by the second. Have you met our CEO- no, what am I thinking, of course you haven't-

Oh. You'd rather sign with your own pen? Sure. Right here, right next to my name...oh. Your name really is Techno? What kinda name is that, thought it was just a stage name, hah- don't worry, this is just a non-disclosure agreement to not talk about this before it's announced...

Nope. He refused. Those remembered words stank of- of- of something that he didn't want to think about, something that made him stand up suddenly on the spot, ignoring the creaky desk chair before he went to go and wash his hands.

Only been a year since you've partnered with us and you're getting into tournaments with the long-time champions. A new record for that, I think. And you're not even from any of the servers we have scouting agents in!

He washed the sliminess trying to overtake the once comforting fog away. Washed until his hands hurt, until they were rubbed raw under the water and just about to bleed. Washed until he grit his teeth and turned the faucet off and tried not to think of how it had been a pen that snapped a little, itty bitty part of him so early. A fucking *fountain pen*.

Why was a *pen*, of all things, trying to bring back memories that seemed as if they would flood in and choke him with their emotional charge? Why was it the *pen*, of all things? Why did the words that the particularly elegantly shaped implement evoked make him feel dirty, feel hopeless, make him want to wash his hands until they hurt?

...Come to think of it, now, he could really use the cloak.

First, though, first-

What time was it?

Instead of taking the open door from the bathroom to the master bedroom, Techno let his raw hands open the door to the main part of the apartment, eyes quickly scanning the room before finding...nothing. No brothers. No activity. Only a collection of chairs and very small tables and an island that guided his line of sight to the kitchen.

Upon venturing further in, hands ghosting along the cold marble countertops, Techno found a clock function merrily over the oven timer- and it was...just before the time that the sun usually rose in his home world, in Phil's world, if he remembered correctly. Somewhere before seven. The clock read five.

He couldn't've gotten any more than two, three hours of sleep- and bad rest, at that.

Fuck.

He laughed quietly to himself, let his fingers dig very slightly into his eyes with the hysteria of someone who couldn't begin to comprehend the parts that made the whole. His smile was

razor-thin and trembling as he let out breath after shuddering breath, and nobody came out to tell him that he was being loud. Nobody came out. Nobody else was awake.

It was so, *so* early.

Techno had to get back to the cloak.

With an almost frightening, singular sense of purpose, he strode back to the bedroom to take the cloak he had looked at the day before off of the wall. Techno mindlessly bumped against the walls on his way there, let his hands grasp at the fabric as if it was the only thing that mattered, sleep-soaked eyes drinking in the sight of the scarlet wear as if it were the only thing stitching him together.

The little teasers of memories were terrible. They tried to cling to him and bite off little pieces of his soul, tried to worm their way into his heart and stay while all he had wanted to do was *look* at things. This early, he was already overwhelmed by the atmosphere of the city as a whole, had been overtaken by even a cursory search of the things he held in the bedroom- but looking at the cloak made everything else fade into the background.

When he set it on his lap, perched on the edge of his bed, and picked up the bag he had brought with him that the other cloak rested in, his hands could barely pry open the top of the bag. Could barely pry open it and manage to get the cloak- the new cloak, the fake cloak, the true cloak in some ways- out so that it could lay next to its predecessor.

He had to take in all the little details. Piece it together. Unearth what none of the others could. *This isn't something I paid for. Wilbur is wrong. What's lying past those unknowingly false words? What lies behind the veil? What is there to this cloak besides- besides protection?*

If he focused, if he let everything else fade away and let himself tunnel vision-

He couldn't let himself do that. He *couldn't*.

Techno's hands went over his face again, pressing in enough that he could feel the edge of his fingernails, could let himself lean into the pressure the hands provided. He breathed in once. Let it out. Breathed in twice. Let a wheeze out with all the force of a shy, rattling wind.

What did the runes even *mean*? What were all the little details of the stitching for? The lines weren't completely uniform, completely neat, even though it looked like a great deal of effort and care had been put into them. At regular intervals, little stitched details bordered the unbroken line of text- something that looked like a leaf here, a little flower there. If he strained, if he let his head pound behind his eyes and scream at him with the desperation of a drowning, panicked man, he could imagine a pin-pricked hand carefully pulling one, two, three lines into existence with a careful technique.

Techno could imagine hushed tones. A warm, but quiet, atmosphere. Could imagine the filtered light of the outside world, cast in conflicting colors, bathing the room in its eternally pink-to-blue-to-cream wash in some eternal, strange mimicry of dawn as he worked.

This was made with care. With *warmth*. The garments were both originally made by Phil, he could feel it in how similar the fabrics were, but that otherworldliness clung to the stitched cloak with enough might to make him stare and shake and *think*. There was an effort that spoke of planning. An effort that spoke of care and patience and *time*.

He breathed in. Smelled a faint lavender gracing it with its presence.

Techno swung the cloak on, unable to examine the depths of its stitching without giving himself more of a headache than he already had, and reveled in how- how *safe* he felt with it on. This was a barrier against the world in more ways than one. This was a barrier and a shield and a cloak in one, something that he could block others with, could block light out with, could block the outside world out with completely and emerge from whenever he felt safe to continue.

It was like being swaddled in a weighted blanket. Like being given a hug.

Like he was, for a moment, invincible.

He breathed in and the memories, already behind the constructed barrier, took it as opportunity to make themselves known, exposing themselves as Trojan horses that had been unwillingly accepted in the moment he had forgotten what they probably contained.

As much as the cloak's purpose was to protect, it couldn't protect Techno from unwanted intruders already let past his crumbled walls.

"You know, the first thing I stitched an enchantment into was a belt."

"...A *belt*."

"Yeah! With the right materials, it's pretty easy to do it on the inside. Neat enough stitching, a simple enough point to get across or just the right type of enchantment- it's like the perfect item for someone wealthy but not, like, 'I'm the most important child of this generational empire' kind of wealthy or admin wealthy or leader-of-a-progenitor-server wealthy. The kind of thing that's the talk of a family for a good year or two even though it's easily the smallest thing most thread enchanters will be willing to do."

"...I didn't ask you to dump all that on me. Was just commenting on it, Teach."

"But it's important to know! You'll probably be doing a few, once you give a hidden little ad somewhere for people to find your services at. And they're actually pretty tricky! Depending on the materials, it can be harder than a bigger project for someone more wealthy, even if it takes less time. You want to know more about the job that you just agreed to learn the art of, right? Let me tell you about it, then."

"Teach."

“Techno.”

The piglin hybrid sighed and leaned back from where he was sprawled out in one of his own chairs, a hand lazily shading his eyes as he stared out at the cityscape beyond. It was a quiet, mild atmosphere, but he could just imagine the chaos of the world outside- trains rattling across their tracks in the parts of the city where they needed repair, far too much loud foot traffic for vehicles to gain any sort of a foothold in this world, waypoint centers crowded and full of bickering groups of people (or, simply, tired commuters).

He could imagine the tang in the air, the excitement of people ready for whatever the daily events and tournaments would throw at them today, the smell of street food and scented wares and murmurs of challenges filling the air.

The city was charged with the anticipation of those that wanted blood. That wanted lovingly sanitized carnage presented before them with a neat bow.

It was no wonder he could barely concentrate on the only other person in the room. After all, he was supposed to be at a match in an hour and a half.

“I foresee that belts will be an important part of my future,” he intoned, far too lazy to give it any kind of a heightened gravitas that would usually signify that kind of a joke. “Hard to embroider but easier given the right tools, I guess.”

“And it’s not like you even have to *take* belt jobs, you know? There’s so much fucking... money tied up in larger orders.”

“Why take larger orders when you could make a living off of a few belts a year?”

His teacher laughed, a merry rattling little sound that carried even though they were just in the next chair over. When Techno cast his eyes over to them, they shook with more restrained laughter, sprawled out in what seemed an even lazier fashion as they held the small hoop they had been working on at their side.

“I mean, it’s not *all* money, you know?”

...Hm.

“...Then. What is it?”

“Favors from powerful people. *Important* people, Techno. Almost like yourself, except adding a few zeroes onto the money you have and then some.” Ah. So *that* was the thought that was giving him anxiety.

Favors were a dangerous, dangerous thing to deal in. Techno licked his lips once, twice, thrice. His newfound teacher continued.

“There’s a lot you can do with...*favors* like that, for the bigger pieces. A lot of those people have more say than the majority of the Hypixel admins, even cross-server, even outside of Hypixel’s sphere of influence, you know?”

“Favors. For service.”

Perhaps he was expected to owe this person a favor, for accepting their overtures of... teaching. Of apprenticeship. His name went a long ways now, after all.

“Not that different from sponsorships, eh? Except *they’re* the ones dependent on *you*. *You’re* the one who chooses what the favor would be. After all, they’re the ones putting their life in your hands for runes they don’t know shit about.”

That was. A way to think of it, definitely.

How many people even knew this, though? Knew how to do this art?

Would he ever know?

Did his teacher even know the exact amount?

“You already sold me on learning it the last time we met,” Techno intoned, and looked away, fingers rubbing circles on the soft, plush fabric of the chair he was in. “Just get to the point, Teach.”

“So. We’re going to build up to doing a belt.”

“Mm.”

“And it’ll take about four, five months of regular meetings to get to that point.”

“*Hehhh?*”

The cloak was a blanket. A shield. A protector that was stellar in every aspect of its duty but one, faithfully guarding him as he discarded the other cloak to the floor, as he hunched over on the bed and grasped it so that it was closer, closer, closer to his skin. He steadfastly ignored the way that the outside light melted the features of his room in its interchangeable neons and pastels.

The lavender scent wasn’t strong enough. He’d have to fix that, have to get one of the bags of lavender he had packed into his bigger bag with him just in case, would have to see if there was anything extra in the apartment itself to help with the job.

The sense of safety was still enough to let him drift again even as he tiredly started to process the first memory to truly break through the gates since he had arrived there. It was fresh enough in his mind to end up with him ignoring the way that a stray stuttering breath left him, hesitant and doe-new.

The cloak was *everything* to him in that very moment. It was his guardian and his own personal hell, an enigma that even more memories couldn't fully explain to him, as snippets of an education too far gone from him tried to return and ended up blocked. It was a guiding hand and a gentle smile and a rough, invisible hold on the back of his neck that ordered him to keep going, keep maintaining a facade that he had no clue even existed.

The cloak was everything.

The cloak-

"I always forget how cool your place is," Tommy mused the next morning, chugging down a full bottle of water a few seconds after shutting his mouth. Techno watched him- watched how his messy, tangled hair was never given a cursory run through with a hand, watched how his eyes stayed wide and childish, wide and curious even in the face of his mild apathy. "Like- I never really went here often, I guess? You were, uh, big on visiting rather than bein' ...bein' visited."

Techno grunted mildly and leaned on the kitchen island, embroidered cloak wrapped around him as he let his thumb travel in soothing circles on some of the fabric. The light in the open room, still indistinguishable between night and day, kept casting the room in its near-pastel shades. He watched as a cream color fought for supremacy over one side of Tommy's face before being defeated by a gentle cyan.

He was exhausted. Sleep hadn't come any easier the rest of the night, even though the cloak had blanketed him.

"I'd kill to have it! Especially having this place on Dream's server, wow, is every place pretty shitty- everything works, but, like, damn. Living in a ravine, you know, fuckin' sucks..."

Techno's lips twitched downwards, but he was distracted by a *thump*, the sound of someone bumping into a wall- and when he looked over Tommy's shoulder he could see a half-asleep Wilbur nearly knocking everything over in his struggling rollercoaster of a path, a yawn hidden behind one hand as he waved with the other.

"You could be a little more careful, Wil," the hybrid said dryly, standing up straight and letting go of his cloak so he could turn and root through the cabinets, the fridge, the pantry once more with only a fraction of his mind on the task.

What's easy to make, what can be eaten on the spot, what had Tommy been eating a second ago, again...

"Fuck mornings," his older brother declared, and Techno hummed, mild and unprovocative as he finally found things- something that said it was cereal (but fancy), some milk, a bowl. He put them on the counter as Wilbur slid into a seat. "They fuckin'- fuckin' suck, man, and

that bed's too comfy to just leave, so I kept telling myself *Wil, five more minutes... Wil, five more minutes...* and now it's—”

He looked to Techno, a question clear in his eyes.

Techno shrugged. “Dunno.”

“...Just look at the oven clock?”

Ah. Right. Ovens had clocks. He had looked at one in the middle of the night, as much as it looked just the same as now. He turned, just a bit, and peered over at the little screen.

“Ten forty-si...” He paused. “...Wait. Don’t your, uh, communicators tell the time?”

He turned to push some fallen hair out of his face and behind his ear. Stared at Wilbur, who looked ready to sweat all of his moisture out onto the floor, with a somewhat blank gaze. Even Tommy threw a little side-eye at Wilbur.

“...Yeah, uh, *anyways*-”

“*Hah*, Techno, Wil can’t even tell time with his communicator, apparently, and can’t even take a few steps so he could look around you at the clock there-”

“SO,” Wilbur cheerily interrupted with a clap, “Techno, why’re you wearin’ your cloak?”

Techno stilled from where he stood, hand grasping a small teabag to make lavender tea with. His eyes re-met Wilbur’s. He stared, adjusted the cloak around his shoulders, and made himself busy with what he had. Water in the kettle? Perfect. Turn it on, which was simple enough- alright.

He hoped that Wilbur didn’t notice-

“Wait, is that your older cloak?”

“That,” he said slowly, almost feeling like his mouth was full of cotton with how his words turned awkward behind his tusks, “is none of your business.”

“...Really.”

“*Really*,” he repeated, resolute, and gave himself the task of thoroughly ignoring everything Wilbur said until the man started to make and eat some food- this time, some cereal. Miraculously, he succeeded in his quest to not be bothered- even with Wilbur’s muttering and moaning and whining paired with Tommy’s confused ‘I-wasn’t-listening-what’s-going-on’ tone- and only let the extent of his responses be a mild grunt.

Eventually, Wilbur decided that the more worthy endeavor was eating his damned food. It made Techno slump in relief when, after a few minutes, he could finally abscond a bit further away off into the living room with his mug of tea, slump in one of the chairs clearly meant more for comfort, and drink his tea in peace.

It wasn't like his sleep had been plagued with dreams, though, not at all. No memories to be found there. It wasn't as if the cloak currently around his shoulders had been both a blessing and a curse for the rest of the night- protection from thoughts of much else, but it had put an itch into his hand to pick up a needle and thread, had kept him up with restless legs and bleary eyes. It had made him try and think of memories still too far gone, the only transmittable feelings being those of work, of strained patience, of the prick of a needle against a finger just hard enough to make him jolt.

He drank his tea. Tried to rub the sleep more completely from his eyes. Failed.

But at least his brothers were awake, and already either chatting away somewhat quietly over at the row of stools provided or just...laughing to themselves at whatever the hell was so funny on their communicators.

For his part, Techno rolled his shoulders, closed his eyes for a second, and breathed. Thought of lavender, thought of roses, thought of the rich smell of dirt the day after it rained, the petrichor that had saturated the world of their home just after the storm in which he had talked to Phil.

Nothing quite *fit* right, here. The puzzle pieces weren't as tidy and neat as they had been at Phil's, although it wasn't like the jigsaw puzzle had exactly been all nice and lovely back there, either. But...at least things made more sense than a figure he still couldn't pair a name to teaching him...something. Teaching him *thread enchantment*, as much as he could totally understand the concept of it, yes, of course. Or...or bringing to mind figures in suits that only reminded him of having to straighten his back, of having to play nice and give the barest semblance of a smile with a pen tight in his hands and forced to be...be...

Forced to be *something*.

He couldn't quite figure out what that *something* was.

But it was fine. That ribbon running through his life could still be explored with a slow patience. He could...he could go along just fine, trying to remember as much as he could without getting swept up by it all or overwhelmed by just a small part of what he already knew.

It didn't matter if Techno looked at a part of the apartment and had to fight off a memory that felt too charged with emotion for him to handle. It wasn't as if he ran his hand along the fabric of one of the more uncomfortable seats, rough and scratchy, and hummed as it brought to mind meetings and suits and a cloak worn less as a safety blanket and more like a suit of armor.

He breathed in once more. Took another long, scalding sip of the beloved tea, the tea that grounded him, the tea that kept him in the moment, and looked out over the cityscape.

Ignored that the angle he was viewing the city below at kept pushing sounds and smells and ideas at him of a life that he wasn't completely ready to let in past his walls. Ignored that the sound of other people in his apartment, brothers or not, brought back just as much.

Techno breathed in. Let it out.

This was fine.

He'd be fine.

He just had to finish the tea, first. Yes. Everything was good in the world.

Techno closed his eyes and let himself ride that precious lavender high off into the morning atmosphere.

Chapter End Notes

not much to say, i suppose. make sure to drink water. take care of yourself. fun fact, i have a heatable plushie coming in tomorrow with a bag that smells like lavender. and i don't actually 100% know what lavender smells like. anyhow. have a nice night!

if you'd like rare fun other techno content from me, i did a oneshot the other day called "a place beyond the sun". shameless plug is a shameless plug.

cya in due time.

xvii. i'll be the blood if you'll be the bones

Chapter Summary

All three of them start to get properly adjusted to the apartment, to the lights, to this new space. Techno walks over the dead bodies of his past life. Tommy and Wilbur decide that a few doses of popular television are great for developing memories.

(Or: There are parts of reality that are masked through the system on their way to television and consumer eyes, and it's so, so easy for Techno to see what's left out.)

Chapter Notes

[chapter title from "wolves without teeth" by of monsters and men]

slight tw for minor...body horror? some descriptiveness of similar topics.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

It was the little things that hit him.

It was the tilt of Wilbur's head as the outside light caught his jawline, casting him in an unearthly light that seemed as if he was out of a dream. It was the way that Tommy laughed, bent at the waist on his way to the couch at some stupid thing that Wilbur snarked about. It was the way that his own breath caught at the sight, the familiar mixed with the unfamiliar in such a way that he was gently caught off guard instead of violently thrown off course.

It was the way that they were almost just...letting him grow accustomed to the space.

Techno drifted, focused on his environment and very much there but not bothering to chat. He was almost like a ghost, the first few days- sometimes, he spoke to his brothers but otherwise he just let everything wash over him. His brothers...Techno had no clue if they were annoyed by his lingering, by the way that he'd come in and out of their conversational sphere with a quiet hum. Perhaps they were unsettled. Concerned. But he still breathed in, let his fingers trace the lines that the past him carved into this space long ago, and tried to take it all in without crumpling like a paper bag in the process.

That tile, right over there in the kitchen, was where he had first tried to mix a drink and fucked it all up because he added too much sugar. Over in that spot, clean and spotless now, a stainless steel tumbler had been shaken by unprofessional hands as a video had played in the back of his mind. The drink had been fruity. *Floral*, even, as an afternote. He hadn't been

able to taste the alcohol until it clung to him the morning after, passed out alone on the floor and with some strange murmur from whatever had autoplayed later still letting him know something was playing, completely warped from what he had started on.

That little leather thing laying on his desk had been a thimble that he had used, once, over and over again until it was too worn down to be acceptable. The memories associated with it wouldn't come, but once again he felt the pricking of a finger, the hiss as a very small amount of blood welled up, the sound of laughter as a companion- as his teacher- poked a bit of fun at him.

A little folder that held papers he couldn't understand was in a little corner of his desk drawer. Rooting around with no aim, he had found it and pulled it out to find legalese that he couldn't understand, not quite- but there were handwritten notes slapped on, little post-it notes that were messy chicken-scratch annotations from a different age. He swiped a thumb over them, the ink too long dry to even dream of smudging, and thought of what kind of an atmosphere within the spectator sport of killing would need folders of files just for legal speak.

He thought of a tricky smile. The smell of blood. A *congratulations* in a honeyed voice too sweet to be real.

Techno tucked the folder back away and refused to think of it further.

He and his brothers spoke with Phil every night. It was the one moment, it seemed, when they were all together no matter what- the three of them all orbited each other in the day and in the night, sure, but it was at dinner that Wilbur would project what was on his communicator a little larger, Phil's smile beaming out at them all.

He never asked outright what Techno remembered. Sometimes Tommy did that, occasionally Wilbur. They still backed off when he grunted, sure, but they still asked and wanted to know what made him a bit unfocused one moment, clarity showing more in the next. Phil- Phil didn't do that. He talked on and on about how he was taking care of Techno's crops, of Tommy's bees, of Wilbur's instruments. He talked about going to fish in drizzling rain without setting up an umbrella and happily being soaked at the end of the day.

In stumbling words, phrases too awkward for him to say without them getting mauled by his tusks and lips, unpracticed and disorganized as a result, Techno told him- and, by extension, Wil and Tommy- details of a faintly remembered life snippet by snippet.

"I- there were. A lot of meetings." An uncomfortable tug at his cape. "A lot of meetings."

Another: "I think a lot of the, uh. Wine bottles were ones gifted to me." A taste of bitterness on the tongue. "By people I didn't care much about."

"You can get rid of them, you know," Phil said, all gentle and warm. "You don't have to keep anything you don't want." There was an understanding in those words that scared him. An understanding of the subject that even Techno didn't have, although Phil's gaze seemed skewed by...by, presumably, whatever the Techno of another life had deigned to tell him.

He had no way to know how much his siblings all knew about him from before.

“...Maybe.”

Not a one of the bottles was discarded at the end of the day. He opened one with Wilbur and let Tommy bitch and moan in the background as they sipped at it, as Techno debated taking the whole bottle and downing it all at once.

Another day, another conversation with Phil, blood coating the back of his thoughts and painting them all a rusted red that haunted him throughout the day: “...There are a lot of people that come here to...to just fight.”

“Yeah, Tech?”

“...They go through so much,” he said, something unknowable to himself coloring his voice, “just to get nothing in the end.”

“...Yeah, Tech.”

It was- hard. In the fog of recollection, even though they mostly left him to his own devices, sometimes Wilbur and Tommy did something together and waved Techno over, not demanding but...just excited enough to make him come over out of mild interest.

They showed him...*huh*.

“This is the remote,” he murmured, “for a...television.”

If Techno remembered correctly, he had looked at it that first night here- or something like that, had put it somewhere else and promptly forgot about it. Now, days later, he stared at it and then looked back at both of his brothers, a question on his lips, before-

“Yeah! Come here, we’ll show you how to use it, without the communicator you always had it’s pretty hard to use it without a remote- wanna sit down with us?”

His teeth worried at his bottom lip. Techno stood there, cloak drawn close as they tugged at him- but it was only a token resistance. They made him slot between the two of them as Tommy leaned on him- on the arm that had been hurt by Phil what seemed like simultaneously a year or a day old, sore and aching and still hurting with pressure but it was *fine*, really- and showed him the controls.

A click of a button turned a projected screen on in the air, a crackle of floating light before a crisp image appeared before them, so different from the light-backed screen that was tangible, size limited by concrete boundaries in Phil’s home. It was dubious, just as communicators still mildly puzzled Techno- with a click of a button, Tommy could bring the screen closer or further away, another button changing its scale ever so slightly from where it floated.

Techno thought he rather preferred Phil’s television. He didn’t mention it, though- not with Tommy’s sheer enthusiasm, or the way that Wilbur smiled at them and sat back like someone

watching a television show of their own, making dry cracks at their actions while Techno sat there and soaked up all of the information, quiet and attentive and unobtrusive.

They turned it on. Figured out how to re-attune it to public and private channels. Synced it up once again to the person whose residence it was- although it seemed to take a bit, with no communicator on him.

Techno decided to ask what the holdup was about in his flat voice. Tommy just snorted right back at him.

“I mean, it’s, like, looking for proof of who you are- and a communicator does, uh, a lot of that, I think? Which is why they’re normally meant to be tethered to a person through some sort of, uh, black- black magic admin fuckery?”

‘*Black magic admin fuckery*’. That was a new phrase.

“But, like. You don’t have a communicator, so- just a second-”

A beat later, the screen opened with options flashing across it one by one to fill its form, and Techno flinched with the sheer energy and force of which the different shows and advertisements and bits and bobs blinding his vision appeared before him. It seemed normal to Tommy and Wilbur, although Wilbur muttered something about just how *many* options they were- and then his eyes caught *it*.

The center of the screen held a little box just for- for ‘public access tournaments’. Another box for ones shown for smaller audiences, ones that were apparently locked behind some kind of a ‘rank’ barrier that they bypassed through...well. He figured that they probably had whatever rank was needed.

There were TV shows, movies, documentaries, even what seemed to be a section for self-produced media and livestreamed people and events- but what held center stage were those tournaments that made his heart skip a beat, almost frantic in its momentary alarm.

“Oh- are these, like, reruns?”

He glanced over at his younger brother’s annoyed voice. Tommy pursed his lips, flicking through the Hypixel options at a speed that almost scared Techno. “Sky Wars, Blitz, Duels... their Crown Challenges, their races, their Hunts...their Battle Royales, back to Sky Wars...”

“Just *choose something*,” Wilbur groaned. “Does it even matter if it was from last night or something? Not like you even *watched* anything last night!”

“Hey- I’ll have you know, in fact, that I was watching some of the Blitz matches last night on my communicator-”

“*Then don’t pick Blitz!*”

“But Blitz is good, man-”

“*Then pick Blitz! Holy shit!*”

"Just pick something," Techno said, voice dry as ash as he sat there, sandwiched between the two. His thumb began to run circles on the thin throw blanket that Wilbur threw over them haphazardly, soft and comforting in the repetition as his brothers bickered.

He didn't *care* what they picked. They wanted to watch *something*, though, so he'd rather actually start to watch something rather than go on for another few minutes without anything going. Tournaments, even though he didn't really care to watch fighting, documentaries that looked interesting, drama television- something. Anything. *Really*.

Tommy sighed, ran a hand through his hair, and rolled his eyes with all the derision a teenager could throw at someone. "Fine- Battle Royale's good enough. Techno- Battle Royale, Hunger Games, Survival Games, whatever, it's all the same thing no matter what the programs say. But at least this one's new and it's more exciting than just...duels."

The screen paused before it flickered and opened up with a header to a camera overlooking a wide expanse of land, part forest and part a crumbling imitation of a city. Something about it made Techno want to stand up straight- there was an eeriness to it all, especially as the camera swooped on in, navigating towards the center of the stage and dodging wildlife (Fake? Real? Who knew?) and trees all the while.

Those cameras are all moved by admin handiwork, something internal murmured. Admin-crafted tools utilized by the entertainment centers for perfect shots and high-quality bloodbaths. Wasteful.

What was wasteful when they were, presumably, in a city half-blessed by the work of hundreds of admins to keep it running? What was wasteful when another part of him thought faintly on the facts trying to surface in his head that told him the server was a work of art, something self-sustainable and on the bleeding edge of technology, that they could spare the power to do something like show off all these things in such extravagant ways-

His head was hurting.

He'd think on it later.

...Even he didn't completely understand what he was- or would be- mulling over.

Instead of getting lost in his own world and getting a worse headache, a tug from Tommy at his arm brought him back to reality. On the marble-clean projection, the camera led them straight to the center of the arena after detouring to show them what seemed to be popular spots to ambush, or kill, or look over the rest of the area- and hovered over a place where people stood in a ring formation, all equally spaced around the center of the area.

Chests stood there, right in the very center. Almost as if he were there, he could identify their signifying marks as made for the competition- almost perfectly carved oak wood chests, presumably a small logo for the server's administration etched on the top. He could imagine the delicate touch, probably hand-carved by some small business, the 'H' carefully carved with flourishes on top even though the haze it took to focus.

Hypixel.

Perhaps it was better to pay attention to the competitors. There would be less memories there, surely.

Everyone in their little holes had no armor. No weapons. They wore expressions of excitement or anticipation or *fear*- and it zoomed in on some of their faces as a voiceover played, a commentator murmuring their qualifications, their dreams, their desires to win. One of them pushed up their glasses, wide-eyed and their gaze clearly flickering between nearby competitors, judging them acutely. When it switched to the view of another, they were cold-faced- a scar curled around their jaw, thin and delicate in the way it twisted, and Techno licked his lips and thought of the few scars he bore on his face.

Thought of the many that twisted their way back down and hid under his concealing clothing.

There was an announcer, yes, he had been thinking of them a second ago. Their words trickled down the back of his mind, Techno trying to ignore them but unable to completely forget what was being said- something that struck a bell in his memories.

Something he had heard countless times before, some variant of this speech. It seemed to boil down to a few things- a number of competitors, highlighting those to look out for beyond their little dreams, shouting out a few advertisements along the way, a finishing wish that the spectators enjoyed the show.

Finally, a delightful opening cry to incite a bloodbath.

Somewhere, there had been a crowd when it had been recorded earlier. Wherever this was, people had been transported to it to watch from some distance overhead, and their frenzied cries layered over the screams of some of the competitors as their confinements vanished into thin air.

A few of the competitors sprinted towards the pile of chests in the center. Others spun on a dime and dashed outwards without even trying to fight for what others were already clawing at each other over. Something inside of Techno just knew that the chests the camera had seen on the path to the center would have, at least, decent items for the people to try and build themselves up with- they wouldn't be completely outmatched, even if what was in the center was better on average.

And then came the blood.

Hah.

One person dug a sword out of a chest only to plunge it into the chest of someone that lunged at them, both of their expressions a hellish mix of the desperate nature the circumstances caused and the exhilaration that they brought along by adrenaline.

A plunge, a twist-

There was now one less competitor in the race, coughing up blood and falling to the ground. Techno watched the screen, unable to look away, as they couldn't pick themselves back up, bleeding out as chaos continued to rage on around them.

The blood was- simple. There was nothing of extreme gore. There was only a clean cut and clean blood and the sight of them gasping before the camera cut away organically.

His lip curled.

Tommy sighed and flicked to another perspective from all the small little cameras following the competitors from the sky. His little brother *cheered*, of all things, when an arrow pierced someone's skull and sent them crumpling to the ground, their makeshift partner shot down from behind a second later.

Another change, this time to a camera just looking passively on a part of the arena just out of the center from above. Techno couldn't stop the unsettled feeling in his chest when the competitor that had grabbed a decent sword and got the first kill took out another person with glee, twisting the blade past the armorless defender's shirt and into their stomach to let blood fly.

...All he could see was that same damned blood.

All Techno could see, all he and his brothers could see was blood and the panicked faces of those dying- but with that wide camera view zooming in, Techno's mind overlayed where guts could be, where the intestines would have been with the force of that blow, the sheer power of what seemed to be an enchanted sword slicing through someone and getting a too-crisp slice through someone to down them.

If he focused past the way his fingers wanted to twitch around a sword hilt that wasn't there, he could see the finer details of the blood that wasn't shown. Could see twitching from bodies that had stilled a second or two ago, far too fast and simple, on the actual cameras.

He could smell the blood as if he were *there*, standing over the body just like that person, the only one now who hadn't run off as far as they could from the center. He could only watch as they stole items from those they or others who were now gone had killed, looted the chests of whatever they had left-

Techno licked his lips, let his axe fall to his side, and examined the carnage that was the center of the storm around him.

Not bad, he thought distantly, comparing body count to the number of pedestals that everyone had started on. His cloak wrapped itself around him in its protective embrace, not even a tear in it as he stepped past bodies, rooted around for a potion that one had managed to grab and not break, leaned down to grasp a bow that someone had at their side and slung it onto his back.

The hybrid took the helmet off of a woman that stared lifelessly back at him, eyes glazed over with her head neatly removed from her body a foot away.

It had been his axe that had torn through that neck only a minute or two ago.

He looked at her for another second. Thought of the fact that, if he had let her live, she would have either stabbed him in the back or run, making him or someone else kill her later.

Wasting time.

It was a mercy, to be killed by Technoblade at the beginning instead of being hunted like an unholy rabid dog that had to be put down. To be killed quickly instead of sniffed down in unhurried paces, a frown on the champion's face as the spectators ghosted his steps with their cameras and multiple bird's eye views.

Once upon a time, perhaps, he had been like these people, had been *prey*- but he hadn't. Hadn't ever been prey, not really.

Not at all.

Turned out, practice fighting against monsters and against your older brothers- and, most of all, piglins that wanted you dead- could do a hell of a lot for a young teen trying to make it in the world, proving themselves in the one language people of any realm would understand.

Violence.

He breathed in. Let it out.

There had been a time when he was weak. Sure. He had been a child, panicked, on the valleys and plains and cliffs of a small server's Nether realm, and had to claw himself up from nothing before Phil found him.

That, though, had been years ago.

Now, he was the unbeatable Techno. He was the Blade, he was the Blood God, he was the arbiter of those that chose to enter Hypixel and dared to climb up to the top. He was sure that the announcers were still listing off this victory and that, extolling his virtues to even those outside of Hypixel's sphere of influence with every additional win he swept- and that was a honor that made him wryly smile, somewhat, to be reminded of.

Now, he was a name that even small servers could know.

That even servers that needed to go through multiple connections from Hypixel to get to physically could know of him.

The smile soon faded.

His fame was all for killing, after all, and it was a double-edged sw-

Techno's nostrils flared a little, the senses of a Piglin hybrid kicked in yet again to let him hear the snap of a twig.

There. Blood. *Fresh*.

He turned to look at the edge of the center of the arena, where part of a forest crept up to be the center's border. Someone stared back at him, their face indistinct, unremarkable against the thousands, tens of thousands that had looked at him with that exact same terrified deer-in-the-headlights expression before.

Prey, prey, *prey*.

Techno hefted his axe. Let his cape act out the part as more of a blood red accessory to murder rather than a gentle scarlet clasped in the loving arms of a lavender scent. He smiled thinly for the cameras that had to be zoomed in on him, imagined the way that the crowd was roaring at that very moment at the rare sight, and started on his way forwards.

Leisurely. Not running, not just yet.

He watched them bolt.

They'd tire soon enough- and, after all, the border would start to creep back to the center soon. Eventually, they would come back to him and he would rip them apart efficiently, making just enough of a show for viewers to be fascinated- just like he had cut someone open with a cleave before, kicked someone else down in a signature move before the axe would plunge into their head, idly watched the way that their dying (and dead) bodies moved in their death throes as the cameras would zoom in.

And then people would *praise him* for it. That was the thing, really- they would praise him for it when they never saw the fucking reality.

They would never know how organs felt in your hand when you tried to find an enchanted ring a nameless person you had murdered had picked up and dropped as they died. They would never know the exact sound hitting bone and shattering it just right would make. They would never see the reality of using your hands to snap someone's neck or use them to gouge someone's eyes out or dismantle them with everything you had on you, whether it was your bare hands or a weapon or something as innocent as a damned water bottle, of all things.

Techno knew that he instilled fear in those who actually met him in combat or saw him work. He passively watched people run. Passively watched others come straight at him. Could see their stares after the fact, after they had respawned, phantom pains keeping them shuddering as they stared and glared and muttered behind their back at the person that had effortlessly destroyed their hopes of winning from the very start.

He would think, staring back at them, of the way that the blood had trickled down their crumpled frames. Would think of the way that they had choked on it all as he turned his back on them to pursue someone else. He would later look at the person who had fled him today, that person at the edge of the forest, and remember how they had spooked like a startled deer a few minutes after they bolted when an arrow had hit them in the ankle, watched as they left a blood trail in their flight.

Remember how he tracked them down to find them over someone else, looting frantically even though they were crippled, trying their hardest to scavenge a body already picked over by whoever had killed the poor victim.

Replay their scream in his mind.

After the fact, after they were down for good, he nodded respectfully at them. Ignored how they had stared at him even in death. Tried to forget the way that he stared at them, axe plunged into their heaving chest and pulled out with a sickening sound.

...At least the admins were kind enough to clean his chosen clothes so he could make a few closing remarks as he always did to the audience and the media as a winner's speech, flat and rough and uninterested but forced to play nice and pick his words carefully, mindful of how every syllable curled around his tusks and slurred if he didn't go with something already prepared.

At least the audience still didn't see the worst bits of gore still on his hands if they were bare, still on his face, on open bits of skin. Only those operating the cameras and cleansing it for the public could see the truth.

And he always won. *Always*. When he entered, the inevitable outcome was a stilted, short speech from him at the end.

After all, there was no escaping from Hypixel's Blood God.

It was a simple fact of life.

The Blade never dies.

Chapter End Notes

been under a lot of stress, lately, but this stays strong.

(by the way, the lavender plush smells too strong. it is now in quarantine while it learns to vibe and not give me a headache.)

keep yourselves safe. don't get into petty arguments over block men. one day, perhaps, if i have the muse, i'll draw something and put it in with a chapter. hmmmmm.

have a nice day.

xviii. you're running lemonade at thirty-six degrees centigrade

Chapter Summary

Remembering doesn't bring calm along with it. Techno sinks deep into his own self, heart beating doubletime. Phil provides a timely piece of advice, worlds away.

(Or: How do you pull yourself up under the weight of what you think- no, you *know* you've done?)

Chapter Notes

[chapter title from "dopamine.machine" by ferry]

tw for panic attacks.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

"And it really seems like it could be a tossup! Caesura here's a rising star in Survival Games, but will he be able to catch up in gear and kills and end up the winner above Teller, who's already made a name for themselves in Blitz as last season's champion before looking for a sweep here?"

Techno blinked. Looked down from the screen, ignored as it went on a wider pan while the arena's borders started to close in, closeups on mentioned competitors popping up, and let his gaze fall to his hands.

They were shaking like branches and leaves in a terrible storm.

"It could be anyone's game, though, for Avow, a total wild card, is on a rampage in the west sector of the map, looting everything they find and even eliminating a duo team on the way! It's no telling, really-"

He looked to the side. Saw Tommy leaning forwards, eyes locked on the game.

Looked to his other side. Wilbur seemed less enthused but still interested, splitting his time between flicking through screens on his communicator and paying attention to what was actually going on.

Out of the corner of his eye, he thought he could see blood on his shaking hands. He clasped them tightly together before letting go. He could steady himself without going deathly still. He *could*.

“Techno, Wil, look, they’re- Techno?”

Techno flinched, just a bit, from where he was halfway from bringing a hand up to rub at his eyes. He offered the closest thing he could to a smile- a thin, flat line of the mouth rather than a trembling grimace- and watched as Tommy went from excitement to genuine worry.

“Everything- everything alright? Are you not a fan of the people on it, or something? The announcer? The arena?”

“The arena’s fine,” Wilbur said, dry as a desert and seemingly unsympathetic before he turned to look at them and let an arm curl around Techno’s shoulders. He gave a soft pat to Techno’s arm. “What’s going on, though?”

...Had Phil- coached them in things to ask? To say? What was going on?

He looked back up at the screen. Saw the duo that the announcer had talked about, both laid out in the corner of a building in its rubble.

Saw their wounds. Imagined what laid behind the veil that the game producers and the junior admins working with them crafted for the public, imagined that their expressions were deeper, had a hint of pain rather than of bloodthirstiness, the thread of their current lives easily snipped with the correct blow to finish them off.

He wanted to throw up.

Unfortunately, that wasn’t in the cards laid out for his own existence. He glowered and glared at the screen instead, tried to calm his jittering fingers, tried to make it so that his brothers would be less concerned about the memories hiding themselves under his tongue, waiting for an unguarded moment so they could fly free.

“I’m fine,” he managed, baring his teeth at nothing in particular as the start of a snarl rumbled in his chest. “I’m fine, I- I- I’m *fine*.”

With *that* performance, it was unknowable how they had realized he wasn’t, in fact, fine.

“You- you don’t- fucking *sound* fine, though? Do you need, uh, tea or something?”

“I don’t think I want to watch this any more,” Techno managed before he closed his eyes and leaned back, tried to ignore the bodies burned into his mind. Tried to forget the image of a heavy, blood-soaked axe that he could practically feel the weight of on his back, the cloak around his shoulders in reality less of a shield and more of a prison, an accessory to countless murders that were under his belt.

(How many, in that one fight that had flashed past his mind, had fallen because of him? Could he not remember? Shards stuck and illuminated moments of it but the rest was a blur. The rest was him goring at people with his tusks if he had nothing else, picking up an axe, becoming a harbinger of the end for whoever he came across.

Had he gone into it with the expectation of being lost to the fight, the drum beat of terrified hearts searing themselves into every step he took? Had Techno entered the match already

knowing the steps of the tango required by these events and let himself fly free, contained by the rules of the match but forever free to lose himself and give it a flourish?

Why, in that memory, had he not felt disgust curling in his chest as he went through with his actions?

What was the fucking *context*?)

“Tech-“

“I don’t- I can’t- I can’t watch this any more,” he gasped out in the sudden quiet. “Turn it off, turn- turn-“ Gods, his words were running into each other haphazardly, blurring together more and more with every syllable but he couldn’t find it in him to care- “I don’t want to hear that voice, I can’t listen to it, I *can’t*, can’t- can’t *watch*- find something *else*-”

And then: silence.

Sweet, blissful silence.

Salvation.

Techno breathed in. Out. Let the quiet wash over him and stop the shaking, gentling it from a violent almost-spasming into a soft, constant tremble. His breathing wasn’t as reliable, short and long in staggering moments, but- but-

Things were better. Things had to be better, or he wouldn’t know how to pick up the pieces of himself yet again.

“...Techno?”

Someone was saying his voice. He reached up to press the heel of his palm into his eyes a second later, unwilling to even open them and stare his brothers down. He hunched forwards and let his body snap to that spot, let himself struggle to breathe.

There was a hand on his back. It grounded him to that spot, that tentative, fluttering touch- and while it almost snapped that thread keeping him there all the same, the link to the rest of the world stayed, even if it was stretched taut. Everything was there. With every second that passed, more of the world trickled in- a body almost pressed to his side. A blanket over his lap. The breathing of his brothers.

The breathing of those he *remembered* as his brothers, at least. There was that distinction to make.

“Techno, what...is everything alright?”

He didn’t laugh. Of course he didn’t- but his shoulders shook in an aborted snort, the only sound leaving him being that of a sharp, shuddering exhale.

“Tommy, I- of course he’s not alright, don’t be a dick-“

"I know that, but it- it doesn't hurt to ask, prick-"

"Yes," he choked out, garbled around the thickness of the ended panic, halted from coming out clear by the way he stopped caring about the tusks. "Yes. Am fine."

"Techno..."

He shook his head. A snort finally came out, all proper and nice and vicious- just the way it should be- and he took his hands off of his face so that he could rub at his eyes a bit more, could rest his arms afterward more firmly on his legs for support.

There was a bit of a hazy image pressed into his eyes from those palms. Blinking it away went...rather poorly, if he was being honest, but it was bearable. It wasn't as if he could see those bodies or anything, staring at him as if he were at fault for something- or an angry face, or a mauled face, or an emotionless one in death throes, gore embracing their frame like a loving work of art-

Well, he could see them. That wasn't ideal.

Techno blinked again, and the image impressed onto his eyes was back to what he would expect- a slight alteration to how he viewed the world, almost as if there was a bruise in the middle of the air.

He stared at the sofa. At the rug, plush and soft to the touch (not grass, never grass, but an almost comforting alternative in front of where he sat). At his bare feet and the strange cross between human and not human that they were- odd toes, all hardened and oddly shaped.

Able to feel the rug just as well as he could feel dirt and grass back home.

At what he *called* his home.

"Fine," he repeated, unexpectedly harsh and loud- and he flinched back. Corrected his voice, a bit. Let himself go back to being slow with his words, go back to picking them out like how he seemed to be mulling over everything else nowadays, always fucking *mulling*- "I'm...it's. Nothing. I swear. It's nothing."

"...Do you want me to call Phil?" Wilbur's voice filtered in, unexpectedly gentle, unexpectedly cautious as if he were soothing a wild beast.

...Did Techno seem wild? A beast? A *mob*? A piglin- or did he just seem sad and spooked?

He let his eyes drift over, back to Wil's face. Clenched his fists tight, tried to not let his fingertips and nails wound his palms in their herculean effort- and ignored when they still drew blood anyways. The sting, for a second, brought him closer to reality.

Wilbur stared back at him, looking open and without reservation- a far cry from the angry and panicked words thrown his way that he had first been subjected to at the start of their recent cohabitation. This Wilbur...was he the same Wilbur as before?

Was this Wilbur talking to a beast, to a stranger, or to the Techno he remembered from the past? Was this Wilbur talking to some odd hybrid of the two, the strange abomination that Techno had become, memories and hope and pain in one aching bundle?

...No. That wasn't what he had to focus on. That wasn't what he *wanted* to focus on, even- it was a distraction from the blood and guts and horror, sure, the pondering that his mine was drifting back to- but it wasn't a *nice* distraction. It would only make things worse if he spent too long picking it over.

"Techno. Techno, do you want me to call him? Give you my communicator for a little bit?" Slow. Quiet. Gentle. A figure that tried to soothe more than they tried to tease, a coin long since flipped.

His mind struggled to focus on the thought, drawn in branching directions rather than staying at that one thought, different from what he was almost entirely consumed by. His thoughts wanted to form so many daisy-chains that he couldn't come back and focus- but he had to focus. He *had to*. After all, what use was he if he didn't?

So he breathed. He took it all in and breathed in and breathed out once, twice, thrice more, trying to clear the heavy fog in his mind and fucking focus.

Phil. Calling Phil. Wilbur was offering to call Phil and let him talk with his oldest brother about it instead of- instead of...

Instead of becoming uncomfortable as he spilled his heart out in front of his other siblings. They were fine with him leaving and- and just talking with Phil.

Oh.

Now that he could stick to thoughts for more than a few bare seconds- was there a hurt he saw in Wilbur's eyes? Was there a hurt that he couldn't identify before in the weave of his brother's emotions just like there was some kind of hurt in Tommy, one that spoke of a wound at the fact that he was more open with Phil than he was with them?

More importantly, did he actually care about their hurt at this moment?

...No. No, he didn't care, not upon a quick reflection. Phil seemed better to talk to and break open in front of than them- apparently he had talked blood and fighting and death extensively with Phil before. Even in this reality, Phil knew more than they did. He could handle it better

Phil knew- knew- knew at least *some* of what he was dealing with, here. From the slight pain and confusion shown by Wilbur, from the murky confusion in Tommy's soft mutters in the background- he hadn't exactly told them a lot. Not before, and certainly not now.

The thread of Hypixel didn't run as strongly through their lives as it did Techno's. As it did Phil's, by associating so strongly with his worries and his life. From being the one who jumped as many hurdles as he could to even get to his island to find him in the first place.

“Please,” he choked out after dragging himself through the fog, staggering to his feet and almost falling a second later, finding unsteady footing as he stared Wilbur down. “Com- I- communicator. Phil. Please. I need to...need to talk to him.”

He didn’t so much as look in the direction of the television behind him. Instead, he fixated on his older brother- and when the communicator was finally fished out, a few options swiped through and tapped midair, a small handheld projection with its connected base handed over- Techno blinked wildly and fled, cloak around him both as a protector and as the very thing trying to kill him and choke him out in its sheer vibrant red.

The line rung. He navigated through the living room, skirting the side and darting through the kitchen to reach the door that held his bedroom behind it, throwing the door open and nearly slamming it behind him in his haste.

It caught the cloak as it closed, nearly sending him sprawling out- but he shrugged off the cape and let it stay within the door’s greedy hold, gasped at the jolt of panic it gave him when it shed off of him, and collapsed on the hard floor to stare at the projection in front of him. The base of the communicator cool and firm in his hands. Grounding. Calming. The projection kept on with its idle buzzing.

One second. Two. Another few.

And then- the projection *opened*. It seemed that the- the projection had requested to converse in a video format, too, something that he didn’t entirely get but- but-

But it was Phil, and he was there, and the final tether to keep him in the world re-solidified right in front of him.

“Hey, mate, what’re you- Techno? Is everything alright?”

And Phil, despite everything, was a tether stronger than some thread- he was a symbol of safety just as strong as the cloak, if not moreso.

Everything in Techno’s head all mixed together. Phil- Hypixel- his brothers- the killings, the guts, the gore, everything that made him want to choke and scream and *shatter*- and he couldn’t help but cover his face up again with the projector on the floor, well aware of just how *shitty* he looked. Soon enough, his hair would probably join his mess of a face.

“Techno, speak to me, what-”

“We spoke- about- about- killing. Before.” Fuck a proper voice. There was no problem with going back to where there was a slight muffled haze to the words. With going back to where he was spilling everything out because Phil wouldn’t *care*, Phil would *understand* and *see*. “But- I- they- these people, these people here kill for *sport*,” he spat out, uncaring of just how much the vehemence in his voice seeped into his frame as he lowered his hands, as he stared Phil down and tried not to cry harder than the bits slipping out as he talked.

“Phil, I- they kill each other for *sport*? And they, they *like it*? We- we talked about it, but- but they act like nothing’s happened and people like watching this and I- I think I remember a bit

of it, where- where-”

“You can slow down here, mate, okay?” His mind ground to a halt, just for a second. “You’re fine. You’re *safe*. Take your time, Techno.”

Taking his time. Hah. Yes.

Fine, he could try.

“I...” He licked his lips. Almost grumbled at his tusks sort of getting in the way yet *again*. “...People,” he said slowly, searching around for the right words as if he were on the worst scavenger hunt ever. “...People like the fighting. But. But all of these fighting games are killing, not. Fighting. People die. And die. And *die*.”

Techno paused. Mulled over the words yet again, appreciative for what had to be the millionth time of the way that Phil wasn’t trying to answer what he had already said.

“I don’t know,” he murmured, the thinking already working wonders to calm him down, “I don’t...I don’t know why people. *Like* it. I can...I can remember parts of it? We were watching one of the games. One where there’s chests in the middle and around and the border closes in. And. And. It’s not...”

Where were the right words? He couldn’t find them, but- no. No, he *did* have the words. They were right *there*, he thought. The words were definitely there, it just took an extra second for him to find. He had never spoken this much at once in the past few days- not to mention how heavy the topic was.

He was doing fine. He had to be doing fine.

He had to.

“It’s not the same,” he finally said, “the...show. Compared to what it *is*. Spectators see...see red. Just see blood. I see. Organs. Muscle. Guts.” He gestured with his hand a little bit as if to get Phil to magically see what he saw, almost sick with himself that he was doing so. “And I was the cause of...a lot of it.”

His mouth twisted. He refused to look at whatever expression Phil was making behind that screen, a jump away in a server that he couldn’t leave to hug Techno in. “It’s...they die. And. And they act like everything’s fine just because they...come back. Doesn’t matter. But it does. Phil. I. It *does* matter,” he stressed, almost desperate to see that Phil was getting his point, not missing it in the way that the exact words implied. “It *does*.”

Silence.

He couldn’t hear anything from the living room, not like he could when there was something moderately loud going on. He could hear the faint sounds of the city below, sure. Could hear a few chirps from Phil’s end- and when he looked, he could see Phil with a twist to his mouth, thoughtful but not completely set on something.

He was outside, sitting at the docks as an evening set in his world. Techno was faintly sure that he had just caught a fish- that had to have been what caused the delay in answering.

Phil looked...*frustrated* by something.

Techno gladly gave him his time to respond.

"I tried a few of the games on this server, once," he finally said, looking as if he were choosing his words just as much as Techno had been. "I couldn't...stomach it. I think more like a person on a server like the one I have now, just like you know, and I...death hits *differently* if you ever participate in or heavily watch those games. Or if you're in a realm where you have the very real risk of dying through combat or not. I think...we talked about it a bit, on the docks. It's different for those from cities that don't have fighting and wounds attached to death so...firmly in their mind."

Phil sighed. "Techno, mate, I...I get you," he finally said. "I don't like watching the matches. Makes me think they've *actually* died, for a second there. When I played those games I almost forgot I was in a world that had respawning, you know? But...people like it. Like watching the combat." He chuckled. There was no humor in it. "Wil and Tommy like that kind of thing, the televised fights. They've never really *been* fighters, even if they sometimes help with the monsters. Death doesn't..." He waved a hand. "*Click* the same way for them. Doesn't help that, somehow, respawning exists on the server they've been frequenting lately."

Respawning.

On a small server.

Even though he didn't have all the pieces, had forgotten other facts of how the worlds worked- *that* very fact left a strange taste in his mouth.

"Why," he said to Phil, not expecting any answer even close to satisfactory, "did I go here? While Wilbur and Tommy...*didn't*, not *really*?" His mouth twisted just a bit. "Why did I go *here*? I don't...I don't like this. The killing. The...I..."

"I think you find part of that in what we talked about before," Phil said, and Techno wanted to cry because of how he seemed to genuinely be considering the issue from all angles- but of course he didn't cry. "Protecting others. Learning how to do that, and keeping yourself up to date on...anything that could happen. You don't want to have the worst happen, you know? But...you already know I'd say that bit."

Yes, he did. Even if it hadn't been at the front of his mind lately, he hadn't forgotten all of that thoughtfulness that Phil had slowly come out with on the docks.

"...But Hypixel was a touchy subject for you," he finally said, "even...before. I can't answer a lot of what you want to know about it. I have guesses, but...I don't want you to go off of those. That's just not. Healthy."

His stomach sank.

“Then...”

“Then I can’t give you a satisfactory answer,” Phil finished, shaking his head regretfully from where he appeared to be sitting. “You were there a lot before we even picked up Tommy, were there before I even got this server...there’s really not all that much that’s possible to answer right now.”

Hah. Okay.

Okay, that was fine, yes, he was fine, everything was *fine*-

“Techno.”

His mind reeled back to a halt.

“Back to...back to killing. Back to dying, and death matches, and tournaments.” Phil...he almost looked defeated. Techno beat back the anxiety trying to run races in his chest. “It’s... just the way of the world, Tech. I think killing has weight. *You* think killing has weight, just like a lot of other people from smaller servers. Just like many on larger ones do- but...people become desensitized to it, on screen. Most of them aren’t in the tournaments. *They’re* not the ones getting killed.”

And then, the final blow:

“Techno, you *did* kill a lot of people. And...for better or for worse, you can’t just shrug it off like others can. All you can do is stand a little straighter and try to block it off and ignore anything people say about you, and I think you did at least a *little* bit of that, before.”

He wanted to cry again.

Phil’s eyes softened- the kind of gentleness that foretold a tragedy. “You learned to live with it,” he said, cushioning the hit that still left him reeling. “You learned to live with it. And you’ll learn to...live with it again. You don’t have to go *back* to it, you know. You could go check out what Wil and Tommy have been doing. You could come back home. You could find a new adventure to go on.”

A sad laugh from his oldest brother. “I mean, I just want you home- but that’s not really surprising, is it? But- that’s not really what we’re talking about. You need to figure out what it means to you, Techno. Not to...the past you. The you that everyone who knew you before will be thinking about.”

Ah, yes, the tears were back.

“...Find out what everything means to you, okay? Just...be cautious. I think a lot of your memories still lack whatever’s around it, right?”

Right. Yes. Most of his Hypixel memories seemed to be about fighting, however strange and timeless the other memories seemed to be.

“Figure out the *context*. Try and find out what was *between* the battles.” Phil reached out a hand as if to touch the projection that he had to see of Techno. Techno, still teary-eyed, reached out his own hand to try and match Phil’s.

“What,” Phil said with the emphasis of a gentle giant, “were you when you *weren’t* fighting? What did that Techno do then? Can you find that out for me?”

A nod. Another. Another.

“...That’s good. You...you can do this, Techno.”

No response.

“...Want to hear about what I’ve done today?”

At his nod, Phil spoke- and spoke, and spoke, and spoke.

Techno fell asleep on the hard ground to the sound of his brother’s words.

He slept, perhaps, better than he ever had before. Not on the island, not in the server, not on the bed a few feet away.

Perhaps Phil’s voice was truly all he needed.

Chapter End Notes

posting this while at work, so hopefully it goes well.

a few days of airing out the lavender-scented plushie has gone well! it no longer gives me constant headaches!

i also hope all of you are doing well, as usual. lately, i've been working on some important stuff in real life and have also been working towards what i will do after snapshots is complete! i hope people continue to read what i do after it's done, haha. i have more stories to tell.

(also it's been cold as shit the past few days. better than the summer, at least. whew!)

xix. and in the wind i'd taste the dreams of distant lives

Chapter Summary

The Techno of the past considers the importance of exactly how to use runes. The Techno of the present is mostly just focused, now, on getting a communicator so this whole 'remembering' thing will speed up. Wilbur and Tommy have some choice words to say on how their communicators are better by far.

(Or: Memory doesn't give you everything, and never having been killed can sometimes be a heavy burden to bear.)

Chapter Notes

[chapter title from "the mute" by radical face]

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“You don’t put thorn there, that’s meant to be- that’s not where it belongs, that’s meant to be between the aethers, Techno-“

“Well,” he said dryly, “too bad that I only have pens to write with, Teach.”

The two of them were hunched over Techno’s little island by the kitchen, staring intently at a scrappy little notebook, various threads, needles, and assorted fabrics spread across the countertop. The two of them, though, only had eyes for what Techno was scribbling onto the paper.

“I...you do know that thorn is meant to bind, right? And not to divide? I mean, sure, this is an exercise, but really...”

“Just let me go through it,” he grumbled. “I was...thinkin’ about this puzzle when I was fighting today. Sky Battle, whatever. Easy to zone out and win just as well as I did when I started. It’s not like I know all the runes-”

“Not even close-”

“But the building blocks are...” Ah, what was the right word? “The building blocks for them are...are...*interesting*. To say the least.”

“Thorn? Aether? Algiz and the rest?”

"Bind," he said, scratching a thorn down in a corner away from his main writing. "Charge." Aether, right next to it. "There's not a lot to them, you said, in, uh..." He waved a hand. "Not a lot of, uh, *nuance* to them in greater works."

"There's *plenty* of nuance," they corrected, "but their function stays the same. You're not putting a thorn outside of an aether just to do...whatever. It belongs inside. At the center just before the aethers all come together. You can't work the enchantment without its core, Techno."

"But..." He hummed. Tapped the pen once, twice, grateful for the little thought puzzle his teacher gave him instead of the alternative to them not visiting: having to sit there, considering whatever fight he had been in for the millionth time that day. "I..."

Techno...stretched. Popped a joint or two, the parts of his body crackling with unused but exhausted energy all pent up from earlier in the day. He looked over a bit- and he could sense a wince from his teacher, although they didn't show any sign of concern- but either way, they took a moment to just snort at him.

"You're getting old, Techno," they teased. "Joints not as good as they are every respawn, eh? Aches coming back the more you just chill out, or does comin' back do nothing for ya anymore?"

"...Maybe I'd know if I actually did respawn."

That earned him a peal of laughter from his teacher, and Techno only smiled blandly in response, turning back to his work with a frown, a shrug, and a small little deflection. He stared at it, at the incomplete chain of basic runes- but something about it felt *right*, no matter what Teach was saying.

He was onto something. He *had* to be.

"Why," he said suddenly, changing the subject with the fervor of someone trying to chase something, "are these not quite the same runes that enchanting books and tables deal with? Why are the energies that armor and tools can get not tied to the same set of- of things? I don't think I've ever seen thorn, or aether, for that matter, in whatever the standard enchantment sets are."

"This isn't the same kind of enchanting," Teach said, tapping on the book before stealing his pen and scratching a few things down on the next page- one set of runes and then another, one more familiar and the other including runes that he was being taught now. "So, take these- standard runes that, while most people don't know what they exactly say, people know what kind of enchantments they will imbue the item with. Over here, our runes- and they're different!"

"...Why."

"Because- and I haven't really taught this to you yet, but maybe if you're so convinced that'll work, even though it goes outside of a more basic rule...*belief* really charges them. The belief of the maker in exactly how the stitching will influence the item. The willpower and drive to

make sure it'll work. There were some things my, uh, own teacher and I disagreed on that worked for me. Didn't work for them." A pause. "...Maybe this is. The same case."

"*Belief.*"

What a joke.

"Really- and it's so interesting that you might be uniting your runes with belief already, no kidding, I've heard that usually happens towards the end of learning, when you already have basic and intermediate thread enchantments under your belt-"

"What does belief even matter, Teach?"

They turned to him, almost eerie in their sudden silence. He stared woodenly at them, nothing coming back to him- and they sat there, locked in a silent battle, before he heard them laugh.

"I mean, Techno- if you're making something to *protect*, it'll be the difference between life and death! The difference between no wounds and a serious wound, or the cloth deflecting arrows but letting blades slice through! You want to do this to *protect*, right? Or make money, even? You can't do it and actually succeed beyond minor enchantments unless you *believe* in your work."

"...Sounds fake."

"Dwell on it," they advised, and nodded down at the small notebook. "Finish that before I stop by next time, okay? And think on it with your old man joints. Sucks that it won't reset on respawn, I guess."

"Again, I never..."

"You never die. Sure, sure. Whatever the media says, huh? But *I* know the man..." A finger reached out to tap his nose. Techno's face wrinkled just a bit in dismay- they were a teacher and a friend, to some extent, but they weren't *that* close. "I know the man behind the media, huh? You can be honest."

I've never died. Not now, not ever. The Blade never dies.

But his Teach would never understand that.

That was fine.

There were more important things to think about, like the mannerisms of protecting through an odd form of enchantment, through runes that he hadn't yet been allowed to fully chain on fabric.

Belief.

...In some kind of an odd way, it made sense. And he hated himself for the way that he threw himself back into brainstorming, thorn and aether and ash and other basic runes tumbling on and on in his head without end.

He didn't even notice when his mentor left.

As he came fully to, blinking in the lights that softly pulsed behind his eyes- agh, so *that* was why he had those curtains- one thought echoed quite well in his head:

Really? It's the embroidery again? It's the thread magic again? What does that have to do with anything?

And then, a realization:

Between the battles. Between whatever happens. That's a part of it. That's...some kind of thread to try and unwind from the tapestry so I can- can look at it properly. Or is it just that I need to weave all the memories together to form some kind of a terrible tapestry?

He opened his eyes properly and saw the city outside his window. Saw the communicator that had dropped to the floor with his own lax hands, turned off from being idle too long. If he wanted to open it up again...he'd have to find Wilbur.

But.

Wait.

Communicators.

They were for communication. Just like the name said. And they stored bits and bobs of information within them, right? They could store data, and his had just become broken through...something? Were there clues to his past that could be found in a communicator, or was that information gone forever?

Could a new communicator recover what was presumably old data?

Wilbur's little disc of a device sat in front of him. Phil's words stuck around as he stared at it, half-entranced. He still thought of thread and runes, really, he did- but what if a communicator could help with all of that? With finding the context and the mysteries behind what he already had gotten? With discovering things that had happened and ultimately figuring out the deal with the thread enchantments, or the circumstances around him staying in Hypixel for so long, or just any miscellaneous details of his life that his brothers wouldn't know?

...There was a step to take if he wanted that to happen. It was obvious. It was clear, given a few seconds of thought. He didn't want to do it at all, given the fact he'd rather stay in his room, in his apartment and find all of his memories here until he had to go back, but the reality of everything was staring him in the face just like the billboard his eyes drifted up to see.

(Some kind of a new drama show about gladiators. Thanks, but no.)

He looked back down.

Things would probably get worse if he stayed here, doing...well, nothing. His brothers could just end up uncovering what he would rather have forever left in shadow- or what he didn't want to see immediately in the first place.

Going out, he could...control what he saw. Could go where he demanded, probably.

After they did the first thing they probably needed to do out there.

And the first thing they needed to do on a trip out was get him a goddamned communicator.

It was hard, to talk to them. It was hard to hobble his way out and carefully avoid their searching eyes and ask, body creaking as it moved and answered his call, if it was possible that they go out within the next few days to get him a communicator.

...They relaxed. Just a bit. It was almost something he missed, but the objective-based nature of him at the moment appeared to be something they were more comfortable with rather than a shaky, unsure replica of who they were used to seeing stronger.

...Interesting.

Instead of continuing on to detail specifics, he watched them. He watched how Tommy looked to Wilbur. How Wilbur opened up his own commuinicator again, absentmindedly flicking through things Techno couldn't make very good sense of until a more crisp image appeared, how Wilbur bit at his lip softly and frowned.

The image was backwards. Techno was pretty sure that was just because Wilbur was across from him from where they were all now sitting, but it could always just be that the image was backwards. He didn't know. (Hah. Would he ever?)

"You had an...*odd* style of communicator," Wilbur finally said, running a hand through his hair with a sigh. "It was...something with admin magic, like, sent whatever the projections would give to your head. Translate it to, like, data or numbers or something." He tapped his head. Techno wasn't stupid. He snorted in response. "Yeah, yeah, I get it, it just...I'm not too sure, uh, how much it's changed. Most people I know use this style." He motioned to his device.

...So?

"So," Wilbur said, and *ah, he had said that out loud*, "we need to figure out where to get yours. It's changed pretty recently, a bit before you went into that...into the fields. It used to

be a little hub that interacted with world code to send stuff into your head that you could respond to with, like, finger movements. And saying stuff without actually saying stuff.”

“Fuck if I know that word,” Tommy huffed. Wilbur shot him a glare. “Hey- you don’t know it, either! That shit deals with, like, fancy things and that sucks. All the advertisements said that those were for people who were really smart ‘n shit. And I was *plenty* smart.”

“Apparently not enough,” Techno deadpanned, and refused to smile when they looked at him with brighter eyes, smiles of their own. *Is this all it takes for you to think I’m back to normal?* “...So it was made to be quiet.”

“Or, uh, unnoticeable,” Wilbur hummed. “Or quiet, yeah. But I think you liked it because you weren’t forced to speak slow, or whatever, and it took your voice and played it to the other person from what it has on your voice.”

Strange. Strange, strange, *strange*. It felt familiar. It felt like they were speaking the truth, speaking to something deep inside of him that resonated with what they were saying. It was novel. It was *interesting*. In some way, it really *did* feel familiar.

Huh.

In fact, it felt familiar enough that he blinked and drifted off, right back into a world of thread and amused laughter and academic enchantment discussions.

Make sure to study interactions between ‘thorn’ and ‘ash’ more before sleeping. Write it down in notebook, simple, contact Teacher if confused-

“You go alternative with it, huh?”

Techno glanced to his side, where his teacher tilted their head at him, body posture just as relaxed as it often was when they weren’t in some kind of odd, intense teaching moment. It was impossible to tell what they were thinking, but it was clear that they were amused by... whatever he was doing.

Ah. It was the finger twitching. The subvocalizations. When it was noticed, people always had something to say about it.

He turned to see where the little communicator that he always kept on him was put- it sat happily and silently on the countertop. No projections. No pinging. Instead, something hummed inside of his mind, and he let one of his pinkies twitch to clear the notes to himself he had been keeping away and set it to the side.

“So?” His voice was dry, rather more annoyed than his usual amused responses to the other person. “I get enough grief from my siblings about it. You, too?” With everything settled from the communicator’s end, the rest set to not disturb him while he was doing things,

Techno leaned back in his seat and arched a critical eyebrow at them. “What do you use, anyways?”

“Hey, hey, cool it,” they laughed, arms jokingly flying up in defense at his eyebrow raise, “I use one too!” A second later, a little hub was out and about, waved before they slipped it back into a large pocket. “It’s just funny to see someone else who uses them, you know? Maybe it’s just a thing for us, since my teacher and their other apprentice before me used them too- everyone *likes* the concept of them but never uses them! Too complicated for anything but movies or big business people, or whatever.”

Techno thought about it. Mulled over the fact that, if he didn’t have such strict control over what it brought to his attention, he would have very well gone insane from the communicator’s functions months, years ago. “One of my siblings tried them once,” he said, the corner of his mouth lifting up as he thought about Tommy clamoring to try one and instantly yelping when it finally pinged him. “Said something about it being *too weird*. But it’s a lot more...” He hummed. “Intuitive.”

“Tell me about it, yeah, and the visual media’s always crisper and you don’t even have to look away from what you’re doing, but gods, the hub’s so breakable, I wish they’d make implants instead of a big, bulky hub, I’ve broken about six so far...”

“...Six?”

“I- don’t look at me like that! If you want, I can stop teaching you this, you know! You won’t have a teacher, and I won’t help you find anyone else that knows it.” They sniffed.

“...I didn’t remember even *asking* to be taught.”

“Doesn’t matter- *shush-* and weren’t you supposed to be *working* on something?”

“...I was making a note for later.”

Techno stared at them, dead-eyed as he tried to read their emotions behind their poker face. They seemed to still be pretty relaxed, if a bit indignant- but that was fine. It wasn’t as if it was a topic he was totally passionate about, even if it was a bit absurd that they’d managed to break the communicator...*multiple times*.

“Then what *are* you working on, huh?”

He turned back to his sketchbook and the embroidery hoop that sat next to it. “...You assigned me this,” he blandly reminded them. “Just a basic chain that could work on something like a belt. Thorn, aether, wynn...”

“For protection? Or just for energy? Anything special you’re adding to it?”

“...Well, I was going to. Research how some more complicated interactions of thorn and ash would work. And maybe use that book you brought me and see if I can figure out any other runes that would work well with wynn to begin with.”

“Just be careful,” they advised, and it was only when they moved again that Techno noticed the little embroidery hoop in their lap, attached to a skirt that looked far too thin for any sort of embroidery that wasn’t blatant. “Sometimes it can be a little picky, those interactions- and don’t actively practice even a small chain with a new rune, not just yet, unless you’re fine with it blowing up in your face. Just make a list and send it to me before you do anything with them.”

“...Fine, fine.”

They stared dubiously at each other. Reflexively, Techno’s fingers twitched- *test out new rune combinations when alone* quickly got added to his communicator’s list. He ignored the feeling of their stare on his hands.

“Really, Techno- you have my contact information, send it. Certain combinations of runes, especially if you don’t know their ins and outs can go very wrong, very quick.” Their voice was grave. Techno sighed.

“...Fine. Really. I know what I’m doing.”

He absolutely didn’t. What bad was a bit of a backfire, anyways, with something so small?

“Excuse you, I’m your *teacher*- bet you didn’t even know what you could do if you chained without a loop, or, or if you subvocalize just as you end body movements for your communicator, you little-”

“And I’m *sure* you knew that the whole not-speaking-but-still-speaking thing was trash, because I *never* saw you do it-”

“*Tommy*, half of the *point* is to not be noticed, and it’s not really trash, it’s just weird, just that you couldn’t do it-”

“Hey!”

Techno blinked and found himself sitting back where he was, staring at his two brothers- who seemed to be in the middle of a meaningless argument, bickering just to..well, just to bicker. A second later, they turned to him- and, again, they looked...relieved. An odd thing.

“Oh, you’re back-“

...They had noticed, then.

“I am back,” Techno said, more than a hair dry as he lifted up a hand to rub at his eyes. He ignorined the regular complaints from his body at movement. “I...hm.”

“Memory?” Tommy leaned in. “Ooh, was it about how *our* communicators are better-”

“Tommy.”

“I’m *right*, aren’t I?”

“You’re *very* wrong,” Techno informed his younger brother, and even cracked a bit of a smile when Tommy groaned and tossed his head back, clearly more than annoyed at his shenanigans. It was with a tilt of his head that he turned to more properly look at Wilbur. “...I think I know a bit more about what...having my communicator would imply,” he said, the memory still not crystal clear in his mind but still bringing a twitch of his fingers as if he were trying to say something, a tightness in his throat that spoke of wanting to do something but forgetting just exactly how.

The muscle memory, even though it existed, wasn’t completely back- but those fingers wouldn’t stop twitching and moving in deliberate patterns that he couldn’t identify. With a firm thought towards it, they stopped.

“But we need to go out to get one,” he murmured. “To get what I want.”

“...Well, *about* that. While you were off in daydreaming land...”

Chapter End Notes

sorry this wasn't as early as it usually is in the day. power's been off most of the day and i don't carry my work on google docs, and it's too risky to hook the generator up to my precious child of a computer. power came back on maybe forty minutes ago as i'm writing this, haha. fuck, man, i just wanted cool snow for the second time in my life, i didn't expect texas to get so fucked up by one inch of snow or whatever

hope everyone's having a nice day. i've been asleep for most of it to fight off the boredom.

xx. blow out the fog and remove all the cobwebs

Chapter Summary

Communicators in this day and age have upgraded a bit, especially in the kind that Techno had used. Wilbur takes charge of the necessities. Techno's not very fond of whitewashed walls and a sterile, impersonal environment.

(Or: at what point does the 'cosplayer' become the 'cosplayed'?)

Chapter Notes

[chapter title from 'celeste' by erza vine]

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

As it turned out, the ability to get those communicators was less tied to some sort of retail store and more tied to a...medical procedure?

No, not quite. Not *really* a medical procedure, even though that would have been interesting-or, rather simultaneously very *not* and instead very uncomfortable and intrusive. When Wilbur had briefed him on it, it had sounded very much like an in and out thing- because, apparently, instead of a little hub to carry...there really were little implants now.

Implants. For the body.

That brought to mind something that he didn't quite have the vocabulary for, something he couldn't exactly name that reminded him of a wordless dark storm in the pit of his stomach, but- it felt wrong, didn't it, in some way? Was the word 'chipping'? Were these little things able to tell exactly where he was and tell it to people?

...Then, come again, he had a hunch that regular communicators could do the same thing. It wasn't as if he ever saw Wilbur or Tommy leave theirs anywhere unless it was letting him borrow it, after all- but...it felt strange.

Intrusive, no matter which way you put it.

But that was the normal, it seemed to him, a thought that stayed in his brain as they walked through crowded streets, the commotion of the city almost enough to make him want to yelp and break away from his brothers, almost enough to get him to try and run back to the waypoint that would get him closer to his apartment.

It seemed *normal*- because *everyone* seemed to have a device out. Perhaps it was paranoid of him to think of the implications, especially in a world he only barely remembered- and something whispered on his tongue there, something about *deals* and *promises* and being *monitored*, but when he tried to chase the thoughts, they left as if they had never been there in the first place.

Everyone had *some* kind of a device. He could see random people barely watching where they were going. Some twitched their fingers mid-air, a far-off look in their eyes.

Tommy was fiddling with his. Wilbur's was out and helping them navigate to the little place they wanted to go, an appointment having been made for the day after he had brought it up. They were all...reasonably well rested, for whatever measure that was worth, and Techno kept a little hoodie up, one of the ones with the *hide-safe-secret* feelings stitched in, kept his hair tucked in, and tried not to act too suspicious- although, curiously enough, other people they passed had hair a similar shade of pink as his.

...Huh.

But the world was foreign. It was *scary*- and memories flew by, a bubble shooting past him without stopping before it faded back into where it came from, a glimpse at something he knew without unlocking anything more. Once, a flick of the fingers brought to mind a list of people. Now- there was nothing for that movement. When he had to push past someone a little, still holding onto a part of Wilbur's shirt, a jolt passed through him, a mirage layered over top of reality with people with hair all pink, plastic crowns on heads, hands reaching at him-

And then Techno blinked, and they were still moving in the direction dictated by Wilbur.

They escaped the thick of the moving mass after a few more minutes, and it was a shorter amount of time than he expected before they were walking into a building and through a quiet hallway, passing a few offices before they got to the end of the hall, a nondescript sign on a door detailing that it was a place to install some of the latest 'innovations in communication'- and nothing else to be seen but a sleek logo with wings.

Seemed a bit- *sketchy*, to say the least- but they made their way in.

His eyes were instantly caught by the clean tiles, by the light-washed atmosphere, bringing to Techno thoughts of stumbling through too-bright rooms, forced in front of people that he couldn't recognize but who recognized him, given enough time, of Phil's firm hand on his wrist and of panic fluttering in his chest and of stone-solid gazes and crisp suits and-

This was uncomfortable. This was *bad*.

But this was a place where he could gain the tools to explore more of himself, so he let himself sit silent and still, peering over Tommy's shoulder at whatever he was doing on his communicator.

"Hey, eyes off, I'm speaking with Tubbo, here!"

...Who cared? That was the person with the bees, right? Tommy's friend?

Tommy huffed when he didn't look away, but continued typing. To Techno's eyes, too lazy to look over every single thing that was being said and parse through it beyond the vaguest level, there was something about siblings and communicators and shock going on- talking about him throughout, and more at the end. Maybe Tommy was annoyed that he was looking.

...Eh, that was fine, even if it was awkward. Techno watched for another minute or two before turning to Wilbur, who glanced at his own screen before shrugging at him.

"A few more minutes," Wil hummed, smiling. "And you'll be able to call Phil, finally, without having to come to us, you know! It's great like that, having a device of your own."

That was...a nobrainer. What did Wilbur think he was...well, thinking?

Rather than comment on *that*, though, Techno just grunted and leaned back, watching the counter nearby without a person, cast a gaze around to observe the fact that they weren't the only ones in this waiting room- a few more people were scattered about, immersed in their own little worlds.

Neither Tommy or Wilbur said his name out loud, just as they hadn't when they had arrived on the server, just as they hadn't when they had left the house.

(Famous. What a joke.

Or was it a joke?)

Minutes *tick-tick-ticked* on by. Techno kept looking around, kept idly rubbing at the backs of his clasped hands with his thumbs, a tried and true technique to just chill out and relax. It wasn't as if anyone could take *that* ability from him, or anything- he just stared and waited and let the time pass, floating on a lake of memories that wouldn't entirely come to the surface.

Messages came to mind before drifting right past him. *Inboxes*. Lists on lists on *lists*, *quotas* to meet...

A past life, an unremembered life sat on his tongue, the flavors mingling until all he could do was just sit there, heavy-eyed and almost ready to doze off from the fact that nothing would come.

How often, how long had he been in a waiting room like this? Always? Never?

Would he ever know?

At *that* thought, the door behind the empty counter opened to reveal someone who stood at something almost like attention, someone who smiled with crisp, shining teeth, whose eyes crinkled very cleanly at the edges. He eyed them dubiously, but stood when his brothers rose up at their call of '*Wilbur*'. He'd follow them, at least, but not come to the call of someone he knew absolutely nothing about.

...It didn't matter that he had followed Phil that day. Even though he had known nothing about the man then.

Another sterile hallway. Another sterile room.

"Where," he said blandly as they all awkwardly stood there, nobody making the first move (although the employee had been opening their mouth), "does it go in me?"

For the first time since arriving, he met someone else's eyes here. The employee stared back at him- and then paused, as if trying to figure out a puzzle that they weren't quite sure the purpose of. He gave them a second, another, a third- and then raised his eyebrow a bit.

"Back of the neck, near your shoulderblades," they managed to get out, looking rather like a deer in the headlights for no reason that Techno could fathom. It was a moment before they looked at him...and back down to a little tray they were holding in their hands. "I mean, I can deal with having to move a shirt a bit, but a hoodie..."

Ah.

He pulled it off without hassle, mindful of the fact that, apparently, people could know him on sight, and turned his back to them.

The *hiding* function of the hoodie was gone.

His shoulders were set, tension high-strung. There *was* some reasonable anonymity with this, right? It wasn't as if they'd figure it out and he'd have to deal with things he knew nothing about. Right? Did the employee seem nervous because of how he acted or because he looked suspiciously like someone who used to be server-renowned?

(*World*-renowned? Techno had no clue, really. Whatever fame entailed, he still didn't entirely get it. He wondered if he ever would.)

A half-beat later and they were poking around at the base of his neck and around his back, pulling at the stretching shirt so they could examine him more. He knew there were scars back there, but. He refused to comment on them. Refused to rise up and turn around and snap at how they just wouldn't fucking *stop* with their *hands*-

"Cool cosplay, dude," they said, giving one final poke before humming again to themselves. He was ready to scream. "So, before I have to put this in- do you have your former communicator to sync it up with for credentials, or do I need to input it so you can hook it up with your data before we do this?"

"We'll do a manual input," Wilbur said, all smooth and capable and thank the *gods*, because Techno didn't understand the bulk of what they had said. He was still hung up on them saying he was dressing up as *himself*- now *that* was a concept.

"Well, can I get a registered name on this server, and universal ID? Or, well." He heard a slight rustle of fabric. Probably a shrug. "Hypixel ID works, too. It'll connect it up eventually

if you want to go outside any of the servers from this hub's sphere of, uh, influence or whatever."

Nonsense. Utter *nonsense*. He understood none of it.

Really, he just wanted a healthy mug of lavender tea. Or honeyed milk. Or anything. All this waiting and not actually being able to see Wilbur or Tommy or the strange employee was... very annoying.

And nervewracking.

Not like he was going to *say* anything about it, though.

It seemed, though, that Wilbur had him covered- a short hum or two, a tap of the foot, and he heard the employee gasp like a celebrity had just walked into the room. Almost as if on instinct, he fully looked up to blink at the door from where he had sat down a half minute ago, arms up on the back of the chair- but nobody had come in.

He looked at them. Wilbur was tapping at something the employee had in both hands- and he watched as they stared, wide-eyed at it, before turning to him.

Wait.

Hold up.

The celebrity was *him*.

"You're- um- actually- oh *gods*, I called you a *cosplayer*, I'm so sorry, uh, you're really-"

"I'm really Techno," he said in his common flat tone, extremely grateful that his usual poker face didn't fail him right then and there. He could hear them trying not to freak out behind him, which almost made *him* freak out, and he'd rather not have that happen for the benefit of everyone involved. It would be a terrible thing for him to freak out here, especially when their attitude was actually threatening to have memories swallow him up.

Faintly, he could almost hear a voice- could hear someone exclaiming *Techno! It's Techno!* before applause trickled up from the deep. Could hear cheers of both general joy and screams for *blood, blood for the Blood God, get him good-*

And what could he do to that? In what way could he separate reality from that past when he was so close to zoning out? Was it just an overlay of a crowd before him or was he really there, living something that he couldn't get his bearings in?

Touch brought him back to earth, though. It wasn't the employee, but he could feel Tommy grip his wrist tightly. He looked up to see bright, worried eyes.

He gave Tommy a thin smile. Ignored the chanting of an audience as he heard music, as he felt strangely like he was walking onto a stage even as he sat down.

Reality was an odd thing, but that touch grounded him. Let him focus even as the employee's momentary fan reaction started to fade.

"I...oh, gosh, I'm so sorry for telling you"

"It's fine." He breathed in. Out. Tried to not fall into speech patterns that would fit so easily here but would feel foreign, stolen from the person that he didn't want to be, not right now.
"It's fine, alright? I'd...I'd just...like the communicator, now. Please."

He hated this.

He hated this.

He stayed silent for the rest of the- thankfully quick- experience. The only hiccup, bar the slight delay caused by the employee's response and his strange experience was the full-body flinch he gave when the implant was plunged in. There had been apologies before it, even a bit of something put over the skin so it was numbed, but the foreignness of the sensation almost made him snarl and lash out.

As it turned out, the implant was tiny.

Tiny, but caused enough of a jolt that he almost hurt someone- possibly hurt them, and *seriously*, at that. *Hah.*

It was a small thing, something that he had thought looked delicate in the tray before but apparently had multiple layers of a very strong...shell. It was fascinating, if he really thought about it past that spike of panic- crafted from admin magic given form and mass- manufactured to be soaked in a combination of potions and injected with code, if the mess of memories floating on by was any indication- and it was only a few seconds after he calmed that the world just...*opened up*.

What struck him first was- the *layers* to reality that he seemed to be operating on, now. The physical, the *tangible*, was only one layer, and the memories another- but his mind encountered something strange, something half-tangible that spoke directly to his brain and other muscles. It felt almost like the strange sci-fi films that Phil had shown him once or twice, but...*different*.

It was a communication device wired to work in sync with the person, it seemed, rather than an external output like swiping fingers on a screen or speaking directly with voice controls. If he thought about it- really, *really* thought about it- there was something in him that spoke of movement. That spoke of opening something up with a thought and a twitch.

Techno's own little universe unfolded.

It was instinct, the movements he made, completely ignoring everything but the hand wrapped around one of his. He breathed in and out and shut out the world, shut out the memories, closed his eyes.

Techno *focused*.

It was all muscle memory that wasn't quite up to snuff. It was something he knew, an interface hellishly familiar but alien all the same, all these little sections that chimed to let him know of their properties. There were folders, bits of info, a hub to bind them all together- and it was all inside of him, admin skills and careful potioncrafting and the work of hundreds of scientists given form.

This is who you are, this new part of him seemed to say. You are Techno, [PIG+++] Hypixel resident, and you have all of these notifications clamoring at the back of your head that you should probably catch up on. You have over twenty thousand messages to catch up on. Yesterday, these people won the Sky Battles tournament. For news: Techno Spotted at Hub, or Just Another Brilliant Cosplayer? You have X amount of credits left on your main bank account. Welcome back!

There was more.

There was so much *more*, and if he focused on even one bit of it, the rest threatened to collapse in on him with notifications and chimes and yelling, *screaming* for his attention. If he focused on it all, everything hit him at once like a truck. It almost made him gasp, trying to figure out how to silence it all-

“Techno?” Ah. If he thought long and hard on it, that was Tommy’s voice, wasn’t it?
“Everything alright?”

No, everything was not alright. He was overwhelmed and ready to scream and nothing else was really filtering in before he twisted his hand and wrist just so-

And it all quieted.

Okay.

Okay.

Everything was great. He had a communicator now, and all it wanted to do was rip him apart with notifications. Now, he could only sense the basics- the fact that he could do this little action to access part of what the communicator was able to give. He knew what he could do. Nothing was screaming at Techno to be heard because he had muted them all.

He could actually hear Wilbur’s worried muttering now. Could hear the nervous shuffling and fretting of the employee as they debated on getting someone higher up than them, someone who knew how to fully help someone like- someone like him.

“I’m fine,” he said, and they all quieted. He groaned and rubbed at his eyes and leaned back, feeling at the back of his neck and coming back with a thin layer of a potion on his fingers. And now he couldn’t exactly feel whatever he touched with them. *Great.*

Techno stood up and awkwardly shouldered the hoodie back on, feeling the weight of all of their now-silent stares as he figured out what to do: the hoodie was fine. The shirt had shifted, a little, to cover where it had gone back up again. There was something he was missing, he was sure, but he breathed in, squared his shoulders, and turned around to face the

employee, who didn't seem any different now for all that he was wearing the rune-stitched hoodie.

He was running on autopilot. Instead of the full crippling awkwardness he was so keen to put off, he instead gave a solemn nod, poker face working overtime. He clasped his hands together to stop their shaking.

"Thank you," he said simply, neither his voice or his own body shaking with the force of his panicked will. There was something he was missing, here. Something that made him act like this, almost a prisoner in his own body and letting everything float by. He saw one of his hands unclasp so he could make a flick of the wrist and a short sequence of movements on autopilot.

Something pinged him in his mind.

Payment confirmed.

He nodded to himself, to them. Turned back. Drug Tommy along and Wilbur with him as the employee yelped and- and stared.

After all, he had paid whatever was the price they had been wanting for these things- along with an extra thousand credits or two as a tip, he was pretty sure, although...it wasn't as if that would make a dip in whatever he had.

What were credits even really for? Why use them when you could just give someone something and have them return another item to you for whatever reason?

People were weird. He was pretty sure he'd never understand them- he didn't understand himself, either, and people acted plenty odd about that. Take his brothers for an example. Take Tommy, Wilbur, Phil, anyone.

The intricate movements his hand had made felt like something he had done many, many times before. They held the importance of years of having done so already, and wasn't that odd? How many tips had he given? How many things had he paid for?

Why was there a strange, unwelcome feeling in his chest as he walked away to the sound of the employee's yelp- and their subsequent amazement and shock?

This is not who I am. This is not me. This cannot be me.

The Techno he understood was simple. He farmed. He tried to figure out things. He navigated a relationship that had pitfalls on either side with his family because they knew things he didn't. He fumbled and he tripped and he second-guessed himself and all he wanted to do was chill out.

The Techno that was coming out was measured. No fumbling, no complete second-guessing, only a simple surety in their actions. He sent money without thought at someone. He took charge, a bit, the same flat dryness in his voice sent out in a different direction. He acted, even with a hood up, like there was still a cape trailing behind him.

He acted like a stranger even on those smaller things and Techno was trapped within that horrible shell.

It was only when they were out of the place altogether and in an empty hallway that he broke free and gasped, grasping at Tommy's hand with a trembling strength, staring forwards and into the abyss with a gaping mouth. He gasped and trembled and tried not to fucking panic at what the hell had just happened.

Techno needed to go home. *He needed to go home.*

The communicator was too much to begin with, and now- and now muscle memory had taken hold of him for almost half a minute. He had been silent. Moved like a predator instead of the way he had gone before. He didn't know the person in his own shoes and he was *terrified*- and the memories were back, trying to push on in and take advantage of that person he had momentarily become.

"I want to go back home," he said. There was no weakness in his voice but it was clipped, it was short, it was matter-of-fact. "We are going back home." The overload of information was gone, but those memories would sweep him up again. He refused to let go of Tommy's hand, and instead grasped it better, weaved their fingers, took a hold and didn't release it even when Tommy tugged.

It would probably be a good idea to-

"I am about to maybe start remembering things," he said, "so please drag me along. I do not know what is going on." Ah, how this hurt to admit to anyone but Phil. How he tried to ignore their panicked looks, their shared glances. "I did not expect what the communicator would tell me," he said faintly, "and this is the first real time I have been out on the city," and his words had been slurring the whole time and he hated it and he wanted to *scream*.

It wasn't as if he could, though, because the instant he tried, he was sucked right back into whatever river was trying to push him along the course of remembrance.

Chapter End Notes

it's been cold for the past few days and i went outside today and it was only very very slightly cool and now i feel offended. i wanted to have the cold. fuck you, texas. fuck you

hope everyone's doing well! snapshots is still going strong. a HUGE amount of content has been written and some has been edited and waiting. i still need to write the finishing bits but i figured i'd tell yall as much! i hope everyone's doing well! have a great day! night! evening! whatever! <333

(bro what the FUCK was up with that latest tommy stream im so-)

xxi. the same songs with the same old rhymes

Chapter Summary

Once upon a time, Techno could multitask as he trained. Once upon a time, Techno couldn't comprehend what a communicator was. Once upon a time, Tommy and Techno stood on two different sides of misunderstanding.

(Or: Could a guy at least spend *one* training session without being called and offered another sponsorship deal he'd have to reject in the end?)

Chapter Notes

[chapter title from "drive" by oh wonder.]

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“You would be very lucky, partnering with us, you know.”

Techno paused from where he sat on the floor, wrapping his hands up in white bandages. He made sure to take care with how he did it, looping it around and around as he kept track of the call his communicator was keeping open at the back of his mind. He stretched lightly from his sitting position, stared down at his half-wrapped hands, and listened to the honey-sweet, whiskey-smooth voice that filtered into his hearing.

“Honestly, you’d go well with the brand- Hypixel’s own Blood God partnering with the finest armoring company this side of the universe? Really, it’s just good things waiting to happen, Techno- Can I call you Techno?- Techno. So, here’s the deal...”

Techno sighed- although the person on the other end couldn’t hear that- and finished wrapping up his hands, stretching more afterwards before he climbed to his feet. The room he was in, at the end of his apartment’s hallway and facing a different part of the city than the living room, was bathed in a strictly lavender and cyan wash compared to the terrible yellow shades of his living room at the moment. It played over him like a work of art, almost, one that he had been interested in when buying the property- and now thoroughly was disenchanted with. Sure, he could have worked on the glass panels with some group to neutralize it as best as he could or put up curtains to block out the light- but this was his, dammit.

What *wasn’t* his was the voice in his ear trying to get him to join up with some second-rate company to form yet another partnership.

Hah. What a joke.

Or, well.

It was *far* from a joke. But the companies kept reaching out, kept promising things, kept trying to rope him into deals that he was only marginally interested in. This company was the second that night to finally get around his spam filters and contact him, and it was only because they had paired their call with a tag that it was related to his contract holder, had somehow gotten their authorization key.

This shit was tiring. He didn't even *care* about it- this armor, that armor, whatever armor. If he *really* cared, he'd ask Phil his opinion...but Phil made his own armor. Which was better than theirs in that it didn't shield far too much and was made for flexibility and movement and comfort and-

Techno threw a lazy punch to the air as he lurched to his feet. Circled around to the punching bag hanging from the wall at the side, let the guy keep speaking.

“And you see, with companies like ours, a contract- hah, you wouldn't even really *need* a contract! Just call it a conversation between buddies and move on, you know what I mean?”

They were hitting all the red flags from the instant they opened the stupid call to the instant Techno threw a punch, a second, a third. It was like they weren't even anticipating him speaking...which, given his reputation, was almost fair. He was by far the least talkative of all the names on the server, really, even if he didn't think he gave off the air of a pushover.

“Just a little bit of money, maybe a favor or two, and you'd be repping the newest line of the Empire Dynamics Armory during your next King's Challenge, eh?”

A hit on the punching bag. Another. Another. The bandages around his hands made him thankful that he had even put them there- there was a lot of frustration to push out from the competitions he had been in earlier in the day, and this person wasn't helping.

“I know you're currently partnered with a few of the other big names 'round the block, through an agent or two and all, it's no big deal- but I *really* hope you'd consider this, Techno. It's definitely no big deal to break it up, I'm sure.”

“I'm contracted with Quartz Entertainment.”

He didn't speak out loud. The subvocalizations transmitted just fine and allowed him to keep fighting, upping his moves with a few jabs, a few ducks, a few kicks, one movement flowing into another. Hand-to-hand wasn't his finest skill, but he had to keep it in top shape, especially since one of the news outlets had recently commented on the fact that it wasn't a style he preferred to fight up against. Gods, *nothing* was private, was it?

Hah. What a thought when he was currently talking to someone who had found all the right hoops to jump through regarding his block on many companies. They knew he had an agent at Quartz that they should be going through, right? Or...well. Considering they hadn't

mentioned Quartz or even their parent company, Sinea- maybe they hadn't known. Somehow. Even with the ability to bypass his spam filter.

...Although it wasn't like Sinea would let Quartz to allow most things through that weren't their subsidiary companies. They knew what kind of a hold they liked on him.

"Ah...*excuse* me, Techno, what do you, uh, mean by that? Just a temporary one, right?"

Clearly, they hadn't done their research.

"I *mean*," he told them, throwing a particularly hard punch and shaking out his hand afterwards, slowing down to focus on what he was telling them, "that they're the majority stakeholder of my contract. Quartz, through its parent company, Sinea."

"...Quartz."

"Yes." How had they not *known* that?

How had he not known the company that wormed its way into Techno's life and choked him out with their demands as he tried fruitlessly to leave their grasp? How did he not know one of the companies on Hypixel with their grubby hands in everything- every industry, almost every person, even a good portion of the admins, the company that only grew bigger and bigger in society in and out of Hypixel?

The company that hunted down every remotely good portion of the up and coming stars of the entertainment sphere in the server until they said *yes*?

Ugh.

"*Surely* you can-"

"No can do," he told them, so glad for the fact that the communicator wouldn't catch his annoyed growls, his slightly strained breathing as he left the punching bag to instead throw the blows to thin air, practicing a few lines of movement over and over so he could stop fucking *thinking* about his main partnerships that much. "As much as I'm...sure I would *love* Empire Dynamics Armory, I'm...already spoken for."

Far from it. There was so much left to take from him. So much still left to pick out and devour and demand a pittance for. But why the fuck would he say so, when the parts Quartz had were the very core of who he was? Why would he do so just to be dragged out of this lavender and cyan purgatory any longer than he had to be?

"I'm...I..."

"I'm *terribly* sorry," he said, knowing full well that he didn't come across as such as he ducked and lunged and spun around with a heavy half-kick, examined his own form in the way that one of the walls acted as a mirror. "If you would like to...pursue a better route to a possible partnership, you would have to go through my agent, Errol. I'm sure you can find them, somewhere down the line, especially since you found the authorization key to call. Now that you've said your piece-"

"Hey- wait, I can make it even sweeter for you, really, even just a mention in an interview or something, not a long-term partnership like we were all really hoping for-"

"Hope you have a lovely day." A pause. "Not. Bye."

And another potential partnership went down the drain. Another rich person scorned, another evening to pass. Calls were fine. Calls were *always* fine, especially from these companies he could ignore and blow off and have some fun with.

He kept going.

It was only every single important person of every single one of Sinea's subsidiaries as well as their shareholders and Quartz's own network of partners that he couldn't ignore.

Speaking of which, a ping-

-and that was now a banquet he had to go and give a speech to in...a week and a half.

What a present. He really appreciated it.

He drowned himself in practice until he was absolutely *drowning* in sweat, letting himself be lost to the rhythm of his own body's movements.

Everything was fine.

He was *fine*.

It wasn't like Teach had been going to visit, then, during that banquet time. Not like it was their schedule. Not like, even though they already planned to meet in two days and then again in four, he was *hurt* by it or anything.

What a sad attempt at trying to make himself think that, really.

It was just another regular, no good, terrible, horrible day on Hypixel.

Just the usual.

"Here, here, Techno." Phil's smile was soft and warm as they sat together on the floor, backs against the little couch they had at home. Techno, small as he was- and pretty freshly out of what the man called the 'Nether' to boot- peered curiously over what Phil had in his hands.

The adult- *I'm not an adult, not really, not quite*, Phil had said a few weeks after they met, even though Techno promptly ignored him at that- chuckled quietly.

"This is a communicator, okay? Can you say that for me?"

Techno clucked his tongue lightly before sounding it out. “Cuh- cuh- commune, icate, communicator.” Slurred slightly, but leagues better than his first attempts at regular words, at bridging a gap that he had been given the first hints of earlier in life and was only connecting now. “Communicator. What is it do?”

“It lets you look at information- at, uh, not information...at things. And it lets you talk to people! Like me!”

“...Already talking to you?”

A snort. “No, no- like, if I’m out fishing and you’re in here, how would you talk to me right now?”

“...Go out.”

“Right. But with this you can say hello to me from all the way in here!”

Techno stared at him dubiously. For all the odd things Phil had done since taking him in, for all the odd things living in a place of green and blue and day and night was, this was probably...the oddest. It ranked above nobody being able to say his name quite right, their mouths not able to make the syllables as rough as they needed to be, and...just barely above the fact that there were animals here that were like de-tusked boars.

Or hoglins, as the man- the boy- the teenager?- called them.

“Easier to go out,” he mumbled, his curious look turning to something wary. Why did you need to speak to someone from far away? Couldn’t you yell and wave them over, or do a sounding cry, or something? What was up with needing a...*shape* to talk to people?

“No, no...just. Okay, so this is the button to turn it on, right here, on the side. This one was Wil’s old model, so it’s a bit fucked, but that’s fine, you know? It may take a few seconds, and, and...there!”

Techno jolted as a little screen popped up above the device, a slice of light and lines and images floating into being in front of his eyes, right in the air. The lines formed symbols that he wasn’t entirely able to parse, much like the things bound in hard material with thin wood-sheets between them (“paper”, which was an odd word to begin with)- and he grimaced at them.

Apparently they meant *language*, which was silly, because you needed multiple symbols to make a word and it was so much simpler in the nether, where things could mean different words depending on the shapes of the symbols, of where they were located in the environment, gashes in trees and carefully hammered gold and-

“Words,” he said flatly. Phil snorted softly.

“Okay, okay,” he chuckled. “You gotta know the language and the writing to properly use it, sure, but I figured it’d be good to tell you about it now, okay? It’s useful to know. This is the regular kind, and there’s another that sort of speaks to your head...”

Techno blinked slowly. How he was meant to take all of those words together- so fast, so loose- he just gave a soft sigh through his nose and let himself take it all in.

It was fine. Phil was good.

Even if it took him a long time to realize that Techno was dozing off in the middle of his explanations and demonstrations.

“Hey, Tech?”

He hummed from where he sat on the docks, feet grazing the water while he stared off into the distance. The voice was unmistakable- he didn’t so much as glance over when Tommy sat down next to him, the annoying smaller kid that he was.

“...Tech? Big T?”

Techno hummed again. It took a bit for Tommy to realize that the hum was permission for him to speak, but, well, kids. They’d barely talked so far, anyways, with his schedule so tightly packed at Hypixel.

“...Why’re you gone so much?” His voice was quiet, this time. Wondering.

He sighed.

“...Kid.”

“What? Don’t fuckin’ call me *kid*, I swear-“

He raised a hand. Tommy shut his mouth with a soft *click*.

“I’m gone a lot,” Techno said slowly, taking his time with every soft syllable, natural harshness phased out in order to try mimicking the softer tones better and not give as much of an accent so late at night, “because I have...work. I’m...at Hypixel a lot.”

“Why? You said something about a fuckin’, fuckin’ tournament or some shit, but that’s not...”

“It’s. A lot of it.” A pause. “Only a bit. The rest is...training. Appointments.” He snorted. “Boring things that I have to do.”

They sat there, staring out at the nothingness. After a few seconds, Tommy started to kick his feet, not quite reaching the water except for when he was at the bottom of his arc.

“Bit shit, innit?”

That got a harsher snort out of him. They both fell into laughter- Techno's quiet, Tommy's loud, and he thanked his lucky stars that it had been Phil who had gone out to clear the mobs of the night earlier. This wouldn't've happened without Techno looking...vulnerable, almost, where he was.

Bit shit, innit.

"Why do you even, like, do it, then? Techno?"

The hybrid sat there rather listlessly, worrying at his lip. He reeled an empty line in and cast it out again.

Minutes passed. Tommy had been lulled into quiet and then into sleep, his weight resting lightly on Techno's side. He glanced down at him- and then back out at the water, back out at what he was doing, back out at the rest of the world where there weren't colored lights glaring down at him when he was outside.

"I don't know, Tommy," he eventually whispered, harsh even in its softness.

Even he felt adrift, right then. Unmoored. Thoughts unfocused because of one, of two questions.

"I don't...I don't know."

The rest of the night was spent in quiet, haunting contemplation until he stopped fishing and picked Tommy up, carrying him right along with a little bucket of fish until he could drop the bucket on the kitchen counter and dump Tommy right on his bed, right in the room they had built upon his arrival.

Why do you even do it, then?

He didn't get much sleep that night.

Or for the next few days, a rare stretch of time off (besides training), for that matter.

He hated this.

Things were *not fine*.

Things would *never* be fine, not really, holy fucking *shit*-

There had been hints that he had ignored. That Techno had ignored and let flow past even though they made the hair on his skin raise, even though they made his ears lower a bit in fear and aggression and confusion. There had been hints that made him bare his teeth and fucking ignore it all further.

But he couldn't ignore *that*.

At least it hadn't seemed to be too long in reality. He could ignore his panicked breathing among a crowd that his brothers were both gently but firmly dragging him through, could shudder and breathe through it all and slowly calm down even though the masses of people were unnerving him, skin prickling as they all moved through. Focusing on it, though, was better than focusing on- whatever the fuck *that* had been.

There had been a conversation or two about sponsors, right? About *ties* to Hypixel and what made him go to whatever the island had been for and about the reason he stuck around so long, right?

Why did the thought of some company called Quartz or even 'Sinea' give him so much dread? Enough of it to drown out even his own constant murmur of disgust at blood, of his own panic at being seen and *known* by someone?

...What were companies even dealing with competitors in battles for, anyways, beyond a few brand sponsorships?

...Better yet, what had his younger self, fresh to Hypixel but probably just as clueless of the ways of the world as current Techno was, gotten the hell *into* in here?

How deep did the rabbit hole *go*?

How deep did the rabbit hole go, how deep did the chain of consequences appear that even the mention of a company had shaken him so? The memory wasn't ironclad in his head. He couldn't recall every single detail, even though he had been thinking about it and still *was*, but there was such a dread that welled up inside of him that he clutched at Tommy and Wil tighter, almost thought about calling Phil, about figuring out the subvocalizing he had done in the memory just so he could spill it all out to the one person who probably wouldn't repeat it if he didn't want them to- but he couldn't.

He *wouldn't*.

Phil hadn't even known much about companies and shit, right? Wouldn't he have told Techno about it if he knew before he went off to Hypixel to thoroughly fuck himself up? Wasn't there some line to be crossed that he didn't entirely know the implications of, something that he could sense but couldn't entirely parse in the context of it all?

What was going *on*?

...It was impossible to tell. But he followed Wilbur and Tommy in the present like a perfect little duckling, waypoint to waypoint that finally let them chain a few minutes of walking, a jump, a few minutes of walking and more until they finally got to the apartment building's own personal waypoint system, until they could finally warp into the foyer of Techno's apartment and he could breathe without fear of someone else...*discovering* who he was. Because *that* was a damned genuine concern.

“Techno- I’ll make you some tea, okay?” Wilbur’s voice was soothing as he slowly pried Techno’s hand off of his sleeve, as he slowly brought him in for a hug, as Techno could only shake and clutch tightly at him before he drew away again. “Some lavender tea. Just- just how you like it. And Tommy’ll be here for you to chill with while I make it. Do you want to-“ His voice broke, just a little, from its soothing line back into concern before it switched back again. “Do you want to talk about it?”

“I’m- I’m *fine*,” he got out, letting Wil go and making a few aborted movements towards him until he stilled, until he stared at Wilbur and let him move away and turned to gaze at Tommy with dark, haunted eyes.

What was he so *scared* by?

“I don’t know what I want to do,” Techno warbled, all creaky and breaking apart as he moved to the sofa, as he flicked the television on by instinct and a swipe of his fingers that threatened to crack him open further with the way that his mind was in a disconnect with what the communicator allowed him to do. Tommy was there, a shadow that was far quieter than usual, not at all prone to jokes and cracking bits at terrible times like Techno fucking wanted him to do.

He just wanted everything to be *normal*.

“I don’t- don’t *know* what I want to do,” he repeated. “Maybe- maybe- a show. A regular one. Not- tournaments. Not fighting. A regular show.”

They had learned their lesson the other day, after all.

Tommy, an arm wrapped around Techno a bit awkwardly even though he was still growing like a beanstalk, opened up the television’s options with the manual controls before picking something about building, about making a home or renovating it or something, some white noise in the background that was just alien enough to make him calm and relax.

In the quiet, Techno thought of words that never even bubbled a quarter of the way out of his throat.

Tommy, what do you know about Quartz Entertainment?

Tommy, what do you know about Hypixel in general that you think I know but I probably don’t?

Tommy, Tommy, Tommy- Help?

There was nothing to be done, not that night. He shoved the bit of him that was taken by the communicator into a corner, made sure it fucking *shut up*, and let himself breathe. Tried to shove his storm of thoughts into a corner where they wouldn’t rise up on him and create an outbreak of emotions. Maybe failed a little at that, but it was at that point where his lack of a sense of time worked in his favor and a mug of hot lavender tea was pressed into his hands.

He breathed it in. Let that calm him, let it actually *soothe* the raw and angry bits of him that wouldn't shut it. It was a little something for the him of the past and the him of the present, two people intertwined but still impossible to fully combine for how separate they were, and he drank it with the fervor of someone who had found utter salvation in a drink.

It would probably hurt to eat much for the next day or two, given the way that the liquid shocked his mouth with its heat, the way his tongue howled and his throat flinched back in dismay. He ignored it- and the alarmed looks of his brothers- even thought he was starting to get an inkling that ingesting very hot drinks was...probably *bad* for people.

It was fine for him, though, right? It was perfectly okay. It still tasted good, anyways.

The show was about some couple or some family renovating a house. That was fine. He could sip at the refill of his drink that Wil gave him and watch it with lidded eyes and actually recall a more comforting memory, the collection of what he half-remembered about building the bulk of Phil's current house with Wil, a time before Tommy had been in the picture.

No matter the mobs that came, no matter the challenges they had faced- that house had been made. And it had been made *sturdy*, it had been *good*, and it had been made with their hard work and not with...not with these specialty tools, not with a crew of contractors to help, all in a well-lit space and no chance for mobs because of *course* the show was set in another server, something big and public where mobs only ever truly threatened rural areas or the very outskirts of 'suburbs', which he didn't entirely understand but which he had heard Phil mutter about before.

The house had been *theirs*. And even though these people looked like they hadn't ever tried anything that hard, even though it seemed as if they were having a good time and their house was big, grand, wood all cut by machine and the projects more aesthetically pleasing than anything completely useful- it soothed something inside of him just like the tea did.

Even if Tommy caught him muttering about *a bit of shoddy work*, that was fine. Even if Wilbur had slid in beside him and offered a few comments of his own- he could just retort on autopilot, only a fraction of his mind able to be spent on his brothers, and that relaxed him even more in some kind of damned, strange way.

He could think about companies later. About Quartz later. He could sit down and ask Phil questions that he wouldn't entirely understand- just like the person asking them- and he could slowly go through whatever the communicator had for him, excavating something like a treasure hunter or an investigator searching for clues.

Twenty thousand and more messages murmuring at the back of his mind was a lot to go to. The numbers themselves, even thinking about them made his fingers twitch in sheer nerves- so he sipped at the second slowly cooling drink and contented himself with letting go of his mind for a while, with letting go of it all and breathing and just plainly existing.

His brothers were there to help, after all, even if they'd never completely get it.

He fell asleep with an empty mug in his hands to the sound of three different people arguing about tiling choices.

It was the best bit of sleep Techno had gotten since arriving at Hypixel.

(That was a lie, but at least he was nice and warm.)

Chapter End Notes

one day you have below freezing temperatures and that time a week later sucks absolute shit with the heat, man. fuck texas. it's hot here and i hate it and i don't want to bake while i drive to work.

hope everyone's doing well! texas isn't freezing, anymore, i guess. although i wish it'd at least pretend to be chilly and let me use my jackets, you know?

was tempted to put "tw: hgtv shows" just before posting but that makes me giggle too much

still editing, still writing. let's keep chugging along.

xxii. a long time ago / the peace flew on broken wings

Chapter Summary

With time to spare, Techno takes a moment to see what his communicator has to offer. Lavender tea helps stem the headache that forms. A world away, Teacher is still an enigma to whatever Techno can recall.

(Or: Alas, one must always face the fact- or refuse to face the fact- that they are always an unreliable narrator, even of their own story.)

Chapter Notes

[chapter title from "the sermon of sister rust" by jack de quidt, as heard in the podcast friends at the table: COUNTER/weight]

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

There was an odd cadence to the world after he got the communicator, after he arrived home and slept and woke again. It was a step-step-rhythm that slotted in perfectly to his movements- a song and dance that held no melody, something that spun him around in a controlled direction that he couldn't pinpoint.

Something was strange. Something was- not quite wrong, but...*off*.

Techno's body remembered. His mind didn't. It got swept along anyways, comfortably on standby as he found himself flipping through a book that he barely remembered, fingers tracing the edges of words that he couldn't identify the importance of. Techno breathed in with a book in his hands and breathed out with one hand against the glass to the outside world and the other at his side, book long forgotten.

At times, he'd be wholly himself. Techno would bumble around and let his fingers touch various things that he asked himself the importance of, memories close but not coming to the surface when called. He talked with Wilbur and Tommy and watched meaningless shows- none close to Hypixel's standard fare- and contemplated going back down to the world below.

At others, though, his body would take him on a waltz that it knew all the steps to, leaving Techno scrambling but unable to be anything other than perfect with the flawless movements of whatever else shared his body. In the middle of the night, a day or two after the incident, his hands went to a jar of something in the back of the pantry, another grasping a bottle in the

fridge a few seconds later, spinning round and round until he had a strange kind of drink in his hands, cool and chilled and not at all something he thought he'd have at night.

He didn't know what it was. Techno smelled it- nothing like tea, nothing like milk, although milk had gone into it- but he drank the dark iced drink on autopilot and it kept him up for the rest of the night, restless and jittery.

Techno drilled himself in things he had no clue existed in the little exercise room he had been avoiding, quiet as could be in the spaces between breaths, hushed so as to not wake his siblings. His mind drifted forth to techniques, to examining what he was doing- but that spark of analytical thought wasn't quite back yet.

Was this simply another form of drowning in what he hadn't yet remembered?

Somehow, this back-and-forth within himself wasn't noticed by Wilbur and Tommy immediately. It wasn't as if he himself even truly remembered it all- just periods of a lack of thought, or a haziness that never quite brought clarity to the situation. Even during the day, for a time, it was excused as confused fumbling around, which...it wasn't.

But they noticed, given enough time. Of course they did. How could they not, when some of the actions exhibited were far from what the him of the now wanted to do?

An orbit around the living room. A pause at the wine room, pensive, thinking, before skirting back around to stare at his brothers. Techno adjusted a piece of furniture. Fingers twitched at his sides as if wanting to hold something- and then he left, the first time he acted so oddly within their vision during breakfast to go to the training room.

It was clear that Wilbur and Tommy were...*wondering* what was going on.

Why would they not, when he was so...like *this*? The past blurred into the present, memories seeping through and taking care of his mind while the body went onto an automatic track.

Techno daydreamed of learning to cook more and more varied meals, all alone in a too-large kitchen, a cookbook at his side and a voice murmuring from a video in the back of his mind. In the real world, Techno made midnight snacks with a steady hand chopping up ingredients, using the stove, turning to gather what he needed and then a little extra to munch on and fuel the body as he worked.

He remembered flowing through the movements of a stance in the training room. Remembered nobody teaching him but his opponents in fights, reading their movements and trying to strategize past them but also picking up on what they did in the meantime.

The Blade didn't always use a blade-

But what *was* the Blade, anyways, he thought? Who was this Blade that he didn't remember, the pieces of himself being put together and broken apart seconds later, unable to be read properly? What was the difference between the Blood God that haunted his dreams and the Blade that he heard less commonly in whispers? Were they the one and the same in every way that mattered, or was a difference in name a difference in existence?

Either way, he heard his brothers murmuring something to Phil over a call, worried about... something. Techno glanced over, caught up with something, and dismissed it as something to not be worried about.

It didn't happen often enough to be truly noticeable, surely. More often than not, he was smiling faintly at them, trying to collect shards of the life he had once lived, sitting on a bed and thumbing at tight stitches with a thoughtfulness that belied worry. Techno lived and breathed in his own inquiries about himself, and it was always the other two who dragged him out of his room (or the training room, or from the windows, or, or, or-) to eat, to watch shows, to breathe.

It wasn't every hour of the day that his body tried to reenact something totally different. It was in the quiet moments. The blankest moments- not exactly when he lost himself to a memory, but when he stopped processing things altogether.

If Wilbur and Tommy kept a closer eye on him, if they talked to him a hair more, got him to do more things- well, he sure wasn't noticing all that well. Even if he did, it was more of a pleasant surprise than anything.

And slowly, slowly but surely- he gathered up the courage to comb through the new presence at the back of his head.

The communicator was patient. It was impersonal. It was probably everything he could have dreamed for in a functionally invasive system designed to transmit actions, subvocalizations, and more through and across servers to people, corporations, and entities that could respond right back and hit the wall that was his actual brain. Intuitive, easy to use, functional beyond belief where Wilbur and Tommy and Phil's communicators seemed designed to engage sight far more than anything else-

Well, that past him at least held *some* semblance of taste. *Hah.*

But it was a behemoth of a backlog to go through. There were *emails*, the purpose of which had to be explained to him by a bemused Wilbur- more formal writing than a message, often through more official channels, closer to penpaling with a friend than a message, which had devolved into a conversation about whatever the hell a 'pen-pal' was. There were also *chat messages*, which he was at least *faintly* familiar with from Phil having shown him some before, with all of them talking quite often about just...messaging people.

Messaging friends. *Family.*

And, somehow, he had a few thousand messages stacked up from various people- and a few *tens* of thousands of emails, *none* of which were from things or people he recognized.

It was daunting, to say the least. It was a beast that felt impossible to vanquish if not for Tommy's energetic reassurances that neither were really things to worry about, and things like 'content filters' could be turned on and off to make sure he only deleted the stuff that truly wasn't worth looking at.

His younger sibling had even given a little lesson on it, punctuated with corrections from Wilbur and laughter from Phil when he had called in the middle of Tommy's lecture, amused as all hell by what he was doing.

"Just take your time," Phil advised Techno, the warmth of someone who knew what kind of a task was ahead of him by experience. Techno snorted from where he sat, cornered by Tommy into being there at all, and nodded almost to himself before his younger brother demanded to be able to continue.

"Chill it," he said dryly, but- well- there was no arguing with Tommy.

And now he was here, laying on his bed in the middle of the night, too lazy to get up and do things that required physical work but far too wired to do...nothing. There were really only a few things that one could do in that situation- roll over to sip at the dregs of lavender tea on the bedside table, stare up at the ceiling until his mind decided to say 'fuck you' and shut itself off, or...go through the backlog of messages he had left and hope it didn't implode on him.

Being careful was the name of the game here. *Being careful.*

But was being 'careful' going through emails, which promised to try and be more professional and less personal- but all aimed at a very specific image of him- or going through messages, where things could be hyperpersonal but he wouldn't understand any of what was attached?

...Well, maybe a quick skim through both would do, he figured. Wasn't like there was too much to lose there, all things considered.

(There was so much to lose- but there was also so much to gain. Like every memory connected to whoever had sent him lines to be interpreted by the communicator and let themselves be known at the back of his head.

There was just so much to be gained. Really.

It was just a matter of not being so fucking scared by what the consequences could be- and he was working on that.)

So with that brilliant mind of his, instead of going through the massive backlog he had obtained over the months and possibly more that he had refused to answer anything, communicator broken or not-

Well.

Of course he went through his contacts first instead of anything else. Why would he do actual work when he could do some sleuthing elsewhere?

A few were no-brainers on how he had to deal with them. He closed his eyes and let his brain go through them with a flick of his hand, almost like a little computer or technological system on its own that opened files, scanned through them, and shoved them back into a

drawer after he was done with them- and Tommy, Phil, Wilbur passed by as some of the most important files in there, easy as that. No problems there.

What was curious were the names that didn't entirely come to him. Given enough time, he could puzzle through them forever- and he lingered over names like Skeppy, Simon, and Schlatt with something strange coating his tongue.

That last one sounded familiar, he thought, blackout curtains not letting any light bake behind his eyes. Schlatt. If Techno put his mind a little harder to it, he could think of a more recent snarl from Tommy, a dark look from Wilbur- but in the murkiness of night, it was hard to properly realize and come across. To fully know.

Instead of *elections* and *fugitives* and *presidents*, what came to mind at Schlatt was a crisp suit, a raised eyebrow, a smirk over a glass of whiskey. Schlatt's name was cast in the same light that Hypixel plunged him into, and wasn't *that* interesting- but nothing *concrete* came up as he thought. Nothing that pointed him to exactly what the person meant to him, all text and contact information rather than the exact messages he had been sent, or any emails the person had deigned to give him, or what.

Memories were tricky. Not everything was something that could shock him into thinking of something he didn't know, not when he refused to exactly look at anything like the messages that were once sent. The name *Skeppy* tasted like laughter and races and moments of lightheartedness that he couldn't pinpoint, a bit of fun before he had to go wade through a swamp. The name *Simon* brought to him a friendly professionalism, a glass of water instead of wine, conversations on the nature of...something that he couldn't quite remember. Bets that he took them up on and won, for some reason.

Other names were more familiar. The memories he had of the war driven by potatoes were hazy, but they were *there*, and the contact for Squid brought him a curious kind of reaction from where he laid- a huff under his breath, an arm coming up to cast over his eyes even in pitch blackness.

Squid.

A joke and a competitor but a friend that...he sort of wanted to talk to again, even if there was the very real possibility of falling into dreams about potatoes, of wanting to farm, of wanting to go back to the island and chuck his cape off and-

No.

No, it wasn't a good idea to think about it further.

Maybe Squid's messages could wait until last.

He didn't have too many real contacts. Some stunk of companies, of names too bland and impersonal for him to care for, labeled with names that rung something of a bell but never stuck. A few names had a little note of [QUARTZ] next to them- and that sour taste at that made him...not look. It wasn't worth it. They all got shoved into an uncomfortable little folder for him to look at later.

One person was labeled only *Teach-* and at the sight of that, the chuckle it got him- well, it was the perfect time for a memory to strike. He thought enough about clothes and embroidery and runes that he couldn't fully bring to mind that it was silly he didn't have more flashes of the past every time he stared at his cloak.

They weren't horrible memories either- which was a plus, he thought, as he lost himself to that wonderful melody.

"You know," he said, mild and amused as he looked back over his shoulder, "you never told me your name. Never have. You'd think I'd be enough of a friend by now to get that honor."

"You," his teacher said with an air of haughtiness around him, "are merely my student. The student does not question the teacher, as you very well know- where did you get the thought that you could question me, mm?"

"Perhaps it's from your stellar unprofessionalism," he deadpanned. Turned back to flip a sandwich over on a pan. "Your insistence at eating a grilled cheese when you know I have much better ingredients right next to...the cheapest bread available. You didn't even choose the *good* bread."

Techno paused. Stared at the lightly crackling food before him.

"And perhaps it's from just how *often* you're here," Techno continued, slow and...thoughtful. He shook the sandwich off of the pan and onto a plate before putting it on the nearby island. Got some of the better bread and better cheese out. Buttered the outsides of the bread, put them on, made sure the cheese could get all melted. *Perfect*. He heard a pleased hum behind him. "...One might think you're homeless, or something," he mused, "with how often you like to nap on the couch. Or appear when I'm not here. Snooping, maybe?"

"I'm not *homeless*," they said, snorting and, when he looked back, doubled over with mirth. He raised his eyebrows, but didn't comment. "Techno, I- hah, that's the funniest thing I've heard in forever, gods, homeless- *me*- how funny-"

"What a *wonderful* denial."

"Hey, I never call *you* homeless-"

"You are literally in my home."

A sniff. "Touche."

"I hate you."

"You love me," they declared, "because I get you all the knowledge you want, you know- you *asked* for this-"

“I did not.”

“You did! You looked out during one of your little interviews and your eyes screamed ‘*I need someone to teach me a secret art that would probably get me hunted down if it was known I was a master of the craft!*’”

“...What?”

Thank the gods grilled cheeses weren’t too quick to mess up. He salvaged the lightly burned pieces, made sure they were all nice and smushed together, and tried to turn over the puzzle piece he had been given. *An art that would get me hunted down?*

“...I mean, not literally? But there’s a reason you never hear of thread enchantment, you know? I mean, you *had* to have heard of it, being as in with high society as you are, but- well. If people know it’s you they can, like. Track you down and demand that you make them everything they want. And people would do anything to get it cheap. Or for free through... persuasion.” They laughed, short and humorless. “Some people’d do more than just demand something.”

...Yeah, *that* wasn’t something he was going to follow up on. “Your sandwich’s been done for a minute or two now,” he said, changing the subject quite blatantly, and nodded to the plate that he had slid over to his teacher a few moments before. “Eat up. You look like you need it, after all, homeless as you are.”

“Hey!”

Perhaps, he thought, teaching wasn’t all about the academics of it all. It could be a friendship between student and teacher. It could be vastly different quality sandwiches shared in a comfortable silence, neither figure looking at each other until they were done and back to debating the finer points of a multi-threaded enchantment sequence.

Really, *Techno, if you don’t focus on it with everything you have it’ll collapse in on itself, wynn isn’t the right one to use-*

Why would I not want anything but the best? You call yourself a master or what? What would you suggest instead?

Well, for one, this is too bold to be anywhere and not be seen so you need an invisibility-dyed sequence interjecting it if you want to keep it on the down-low, which would be next to impossible without losing sleep and time and health to it-

Sounds like quitter talk.

I swear-

Yeah, this was good. It was a respite from tournaments, from sinking his teeth in deep enough for them to be bloodied the next day. It was a break from standing over bodies and being mindful of a missed fleck or two of blood on his cheek when he addressed whatever group wanted his closing remarks that night.

It was something to do when you didn't want to focus on whatever scars were gained every so often, too.

Techno never died, sure, but the god could be wounded. Why not embroider and theorize and talk with his teacher to let that pain pass by quicker?

He hadn't asked for it, but he knew he owed his teacher for their reaching out.

He was pretty sure they knew that, too.

Chapter End Notes

bit of a short(er) one today. is it just a joke, or is this reality? to what extent can someone be an unreliable narrator? not like there are too many secrets to be had here, but it was too fun to not pass up.

my cat got in the way of the process uploading this. say hi to my cat sugar, folks. she doesn't care about any of yall.

have a nice day. if you haven't seen tommy's stream today (~3/1/21), uh....well. hope you're vibing?

xxiii. (it's catalyzing with) a breath of calefaction

Chapter Summary

Techno wishes he could go back to farming. The news runs yet another segment on their mysterious ex-star. Tommy and Wilbur delight in what is known as wearing topical Techno merchandise that he does not entirely understand.

(Or: apparently, he hadn't gone MIA and left without telling anybody. That's something of a faint surprise.)

Chapter Notes

[chapter title from "notus" by the oh hellos]

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Techno laid oh-so still in his bed, heart *th-thumping* in a jumpy staccato rhythm that wouldn't settle down. He opened his eyes. The blackness didn't change except for a peek of cyan curling around the edge of a curtain.

He closed his eyes again.

The communicator hummed happily at him, forever patient to stay open to what it was already showing him in the back of his consciousness.

A contact. *Teach*. No other name provided.

...Something that had never been added since the contact was created. At all, according to the changelog that sent over its data when he twisted a hand just so.

It was a curious thing, one that he had no control over- he could have known of their name for forever or could have just never figured it out. That, though- that was all the realm of past Techno, the one that had all the control over whatever was shoved into his active memory or to his communicator, in that corner that now kept itself cheerily inactive or active at will for him.

It was a mystery he couldn't figure out. But there was- was- *something* had murmured in that memory, something had appeared and made itself known and now he was back to trying to fit cryptic pieces together as if it was the worst puzzle in existence.

Hunt you down.

A *secret art*.

Techno didn't exactly *have* the moment of when he was approached to learn the method of enchantment in his library of memories. He didn't know- *couldn't* know- exactly what to do. He didn't know how to sleuth that out, or how to connect everything up so he had that knowledge of the art of thread enchanting back to *use* again. It was functionally re-lost, even if parts were revealed to him sparingly.

Gods, why was remembering so- so- so *frustrating*?

He still couldn't sleep. His contacts remained merrily open- Teach, Squid, Phil, everyone else and then those contacts from companies and then some more which were *entirely* alien. Mulling over them- over any of it, the information presented through the contacts stream of data relatively impersonal and bland- brought to mind no memories. He lingered on them, lingered on that boring information attached- ranks within the system, public flair that was quite obvious to see as if it were an ID-

But he didn't really *care*, did he? The ranking system meant nothing to Techno, since he couldn't contextualize it. The **[PIG+++]** that sat at the back of his own personal information as if bolded through the data filtering through his head held no meaning to him other than being quite obviously *different* to everything else.

(Some people were absent of an obvious rank at all.)

It was all curious, curious even with the blandness of it all- but...he was getting exhausted. His mind was running and rerunning loops that he didn't entirely understand, set right on a hellish track to eternity and back. Techno breathed in and out, made sure to set the communicator to *off* and *inactive*, and made sure again that his eyes were closed before he tried to rest, no bubbling murmur in his head other than memories trying and failing to float to the surface.

He dreamt of threads. Of bloodstains. Of a figure obscured with something he couldn't quite see, examining a cloak with an ever-set smile.

It was odd, to not be able to farm.

It was something he didn't entirely get. There was a confinement to that, really- there were no plants in the apartment other than the dried lavender that was brought in to scent his personal room. Well, no plants that didn't seem to just be for decoration, already on some kind of auto-watering system- or simply fake, since he hadn't been watering them at all.

Techno wanted to feel dirt beneath his feet again. He wanted to farm potatoes, less out of a necessity and more out of a *want* for that quiet atmosphere of Phil's again. The lovely volume there was like a blanket that wrapped around him, comfortable and soothing. The quiet that

fell here, in his apartment- it wasn't *welcome* in the way it was at Phil's. It wasn't peppered with anything but an air conditioning system, faint sounds of the city, of quiet breathing instead of the sounds of nature and life and *good*. It wasn't something he entirely liked, if he were being honest.

Well. He *was* being honest.

He wanted to dig out potatoes. He wanted to sweat and check on his harvest and make sure the rest was fine, the rest of the things that Phil planted were doing well, wanted to fish if everything was done so he could still marvel at the fact that something would bite.

He wanted to get lost in it again with the anchoring knowledge that there would be someone to pull him back out of the routine if need be.

But he *couldn't*.

Phil, when he mentioned it to him, laughed. Techno could use this communicator to call him, now, absentmindedly perched in the living room while Wilbur squinted at the microwave a few paces away and as Tommy stayed busy by being passed out in his little guest room. He could sense Phil, in that part of his brain that the communicator lived in- could know, even, the way that he smiled and exactly how he looked. It was almost like a video in the proper sense, except...in HD? High quality? Whatever the term actually turned out to be- sent from firing synapses back to his brain. There was no proper video response, but it didn't seem like Phil minded, with the fact that he had his communicator on a counter while he chopped up vegetables for a meal.

Phil laughed and laughed and *laughed* at his talk of wanting to farm before getting that soft-eyed look that really *got* Techno- the one that said *I care, I know what you're feeling, I sympathize*. "I really miss you guys, too," he murmured, and Techno could see behind his closed eyelids Phil's sad little smile. "Your potatoes are doing great, mate, anyhow. Staggering them was a good idea- I mean, I *know* they grow fast, especially with the way private servers work, but there's always something going in, something going out. I'm trying to keep that situation going."

"Good," Techno said, subtle jaw movements and bits of the throat coming together to subvocalize the way he had finally figured out to do. It had been a challenge to properly get all of that back, mostly driven by half-memories of him having conversations with people while he was pretending to listen to someone else and the muscle memory that came along with it- but it was *useful*. He didn't always want the others listening in on what he was saying, anyways, and Wilbur seemed a bit too preoccupied with the kitchen and microwave to need a distraction.

Honestly. He was half sure his brother would burn down the place if not for the fact that he knew Wilbur was mumbling an ingredients list and something about times for the microwave.

"I just..." Techno gave an idle little hum, nothing loud enough to carry to Wilbur but something that transmitted over to Phil all the same. "I just don't like that I can't farm, here. There's nothing to focus on but. But for who I used to be. The person that lived here."

"*You* lived there," Phil responded, and oh, how he knew the way that half-broken tone hid all the buried wishes for him to return exactly as he had been before the incident. *How bittersweet.* "It'll get easier, okay? Just try to find something to busy your hands, okay? How do puzzles sound? Maybe cooking? You liked cooking back here, a bit. Just not as many potatoes in your pantry now that you're in the big city again."

"Maybe," he allowed. "I'll...find something to do."

"Love you, Tech. You'll do just fine. Potatoes aren't the whole world, remember that."

"...Yeah."

Of course, of course, *of course-*

The obvious course to go after the conversation would probably be to...find a jigsaw puzzle in the apartment to go with Phil's suggestions, if there was one. Maybe go and check up on Wilbur to find out whatever the hell he actually wanted to make. Was making. *Whatever.*

Instead, the ghost haunting him decided to pilot him right back to his bedroom before rooting around in various drawers for bits and bobs that he only realized halfway through were...were for embroidery.

Techno hadn't known embroidery. *Didn't* know it, rather. All he knew was what was told to him in half-remembered flashes and whatever his mind decided to pull up by roulette. But- he was threading the needle, the door closed behind him. He was puzzling over a hoop for a second before his hands fastened everything without him paying attention.

The next thing he knew, there were a series of shitty little designs dotting their way around blank fabric. There was the scent of lavender in his nostrils flaring as he stared down at the hoop, at his hand, looking up to see no change in the world outside. He looked down again to see that half of a leaf had been added.

Wait. That wasn't actually a leaf. He blinked again and it revealed itself to his eyes, rubbed lightly until he wasn't imagining things- little runes were stitched onto the fabric.

Ah.

He didn't recognize even half of what was on there. A few he could murkily name were scattered about, stressed with importance from the memories- *thorn, ash*, to name two- but so many more looked more complicated, more esoteric, more...*more*.

Techno grimaced. Set it aside. He went fishing, again, in drawers for secrets of the world he hadn't known about until this *Teach* had given it to him on a silver platter- what looked to be a mostly-finished scarf with tiny runes in gold, another that looked to be a pair of trousers with some of their inside parts stitched neatly, and...and...

Techno pulled out a jacket. It was made of a strong blue fabric- *jean fabric*, his mind supplied- and it had...nothing on it. It was packed with all of the rest, though, but- what had even been the point of this?

A gift? A commission? Something personal?

He changed out a thread, the ghost of his past repossessing him. He breathed in and out and let himself drift in and out of focus, tiny runes finding themselves at the edge of a circle before spiraling inwards. There wasn't a ton of work that could be done in such a short time- but there was a row of runes. Half of another. He blinked once and found that ten runes had been added to the five he had absentmindedly been stitching in.

His hands weren't cramped. He frowned, just a little bit. Pricked his finger with a needle.

Yes, that still hurt.

Wait- *still*?

There was a comfort in sewing unknown symbols onto a mostly unknown piece of clothing, one that didn't seem as if it would fit him. There was a soothing nature to it, something that calmed down his worries, his want to pace and grumble and think about potatoes. For the time he stitched, he barely thought of anything at all- and when he did, it was as if he were drifting, floating on a sea of the room's underlying scent of lavender.

Come to think of it- he wanted lavender tea. Making some would probably be better than doing nothing, right?

If Wilbur opened the door to peek his head in just as Techno finished putting all the supplies away, unaware of the sorting system that he slotted everything into perfectly- well, it didn't matter what he had been doing anyways, right? Wilbur made food. Techno was about to make tea.

Somehow, he thought, things would get better.

Things...somehow, things got better.

They did. They really did. Techno woke up and he breathed and he tried to find his footing and he went back to sleep every day only marginally sure that he had been able to do so. He juggled all of the balls of his past life, ducking one only to crash into the others, and was there really any sure footing to really be found amongst it all?

But it was better than before, in some strange kind of way.

And then, one day, he found that his face was staring back at him from the news.

Techno woke up, rolled out of bed and trudged out of the room to find Wilbur engrossed at the television- and, yes, that was his own face. It was unnatural, it was touched up, his eyelashes curled and lengthened and makeup just enough to make him ethereal and otherworldly- but it was him.

“Techno, come, come look at this, isn’t it hilarious- look-“

TECHNO, HYPIXEL’S BLADE, RETURNING TO THE SERVER?

Ah. That was uncomfortable to see. He gulped and let his communicator access an online news feed, which...didn’t actually have much of note on it besides a title that echoed the broadcast’s. He couldn’t parse everything they were saying on the screen proper, but-

“It’s been heard that we may have the only undefeated champion of Hypixel back after leaving the hub for a stint in the most recent expansion to the server- has he renounced his last public remarks before leaving, or is this just a cosplayer with a convincing attitude?”

“I’m not too sure, Lee, but it seems like we’ll have our work cut out for us! Fans have been out and about, and some of them look quite legit! Here, we have our interview with one of the most popular social media influencers as of late to give us their opinion, as a long-time Techno cosplayer and fan...”

Ah. He hated this.

He *knew* he hated this.

Techno promptly turned back around and went into his room again.

Being known, he thought, was a terrible, terrible ordeal.

Of course, Tommy and Wilbur thought it was funny. For his own part, Techno was caught up in thoughts about companies, about what ‘last public remarks’ could have meant, about the fact that he really was popular enough to have...*doppelgangers*.

He got a lot of stitching done that day. A lot of spacing out before the inevitable call from beyond his locked door-

“Hey, Techno, let’s head out- it’s the perfect time! Take a look, see the sights, remember the good things, huh? You didn’t do everything here! And I know it, I talked to you once and you went on this *whooole* rant about the best places in the city-“

No. Of course not. He refused. They had just run a news segment on him.

“But every Techno fan’ll be out! You’ll just be another person with what people think is a wig or cool dyed hair and knowledge on how to fake scars with makeup and whatever black magic those people use to look like you and you’ll just, just *blend* into the crowd-“

“Tommy,” he called out, exasperated, heart trying its hardest to thump a little harder, a little louder, “I don’t think that’s a good idea. I...my...my ears. My hair. My *tusks*. My...voice?”

“All things cosplayers can mimic,” Wilbur interjected, audibly clapping his hands past the barrier with an ear-to-ear grin coming through in his voice. “It’ll be good to get you out of the house, dear brother of ours! You’ve been too much of a shut-in for the past two, three weeks! What better than accompanying us to your favorite places, curated by...*yourself!*”

...For some reason, he was pretty sure that the favorite places he had apparently told them about weren't exactly his favorites. But. There was a point at which arguments meant nothing against two brothers hell-bent on reintroducing him to the wider world, and it was blatantly obvious that they were on a warpath that would not be stopped, come hell or high water.

Even when he let them drag him around.

Phil was...unsympathetic, when he called to protest it all after Wilbur finally cajoled him out of his room with promises of lavender tea. Whatever. It seemed that, apparently, telling his older brothers that he had been planning on shocking himself into remembering by nearly dying again and again was worse than being in a crowd of people, barely able to breathe- or having to, ah, *interact* with those people.

Eugh.

Logic.

"Off you go, Techno," Wilbur told him with a bright smile, patting him on the shoulder and nudging him right back towards his room. Techno, still in comfortable pajamas that hadn't been taken off for at least a day or two, scowled. "Wear a hoodie, one of your nice ones! Apparently it's pretty cold out, maybe bring a second, you always get too fucking *cold*—"

"No, I don't."

"Yes, you do," Wilbur crooned. "Off. Off you go, sweet summer child. Get something that makes you look like a fan. A bit of merch. It'll be funny."

"Oh- oh- *fuck*, you reminded me, Wil, I need to get my Techno hoodie—"

"Now *that's* the spirit, Tommy! Techno, just- just go, come on, it'll be fun! You'll love it!"

"For some unfathomable reason," he deadpanned, "I know I absolutely won't love it."

And of course some of the pieces in his wardrobe were, in fact, presumably merch. He hadn't exactly noted it, hadn't known any of the in-jokes- but *Blood God* on a shirt rung an uncomfortable bell, bringing to mind how he had thought of himself in hazy memories. Similarly, *the Blade Never Dies* on a hoodie kept pinging something inside of him until he uncomfortably acknowledged that its origins were probably similar to the other title.

Techno stared at another hoodie emblazoned with 'Blood for the Blood God' and quite seriously debated running away from his apartment, his brothers, and the server to never come back again.

How did one appear as a fan? What was 'fan culture' like? He looked at himself in the mirror after choosing the *Blade* hoodie, comforted in the fact that it had runes that gave off the feeling of *hiding* stitched into them. Overlayed on his face, in the back of his mind, came adverts and polished looks like what the news showed that he could barely remember having been done. He could almost breathe in makeup from where he stood, thought of something

being applied to his face, his posture being checked, multiple people looking critically at him until a shoot was finally over and he could relax-

Except...not. Because he had the sense that he hadn't liked any of them and oh, *gods*, shards of memories and muscle memory had faded remarkably well into his everyday life and he stopped his hand seconds away from opening a drawer, hand going for....foundation, of all things. His body was doing things that he didn't want it to do.

He put it back on the bathroom counter, feeling oddly like he was- and wasn't- in his own body. He wasn't drifting, but...that had been. *Weird*.

No makeup was put on, in the end. He brought his hair up and grimaced at it before taking it down again, too tired to even try doing something to it besides rounding it up into a ponytail.

Maybe it'd help with being seen as a...*cosplayer*.

He was pretty sure he knew what those were, right?

...*Right*.

"Lookin' *good*," Tommy shouted from across the room when he appeared in the central room, the two of them coming out at the same time. Techno looked down at himself- a bit scruffy, hair brushed through but not sprayed and combed within an inch of perfection, probably looking too exhausted and haggard for his own good- but he felt...normal. Tommy, for his part, mostly just had on a huge grin and a hoodie that was far too similar to Techno's own.

'THE BLOOD GOD NEVER DIES,' the text on Tommy's hoodie yelled in a bright crimson. The black background of the hoodie looked...*odd* on him, just as the mainly muted red hood on Techno with its own text in a calming off-white seemed *odd* for Techno.

Maybe not, actually. It was a pretty soft hoodie. Pretty good, even on top of the long-sleeved shirt he had on underneath.

Wilbur gave them both a once-over. "Techno, maybe...go grab a scarf. You get cold way too easily, *gods*, and the forecast said it was chilly..."

He thought of wintery fields, of cold seeping into him even with the shawl he had made providing extra protection, of crows and shivering and mindless misery. Thought of the few days the cold had hinted at biting on Phil's field, bundling himself up in a long-sleeved shirt and a hoodie under his cloak when on a normal day it would be far too hot to have more than a short-sleeved shirt under there.

Techno fetched a scarf, all muted creams and golds, and sank into the warmth it gave as they went on their first proper venture all together outside of the apartment since they arrived.

Wilbur and Tommy were happy. *Elated*. As if they wanted to say *Finally, we're out with Techno, too, and it's only been a few fucking weeks!* but were too kind to say so.

For his part, he pushed his hands into the hoodie's central pocket and tried his best to zone out as they left.

It wouldn't do to linger on the moods of his brothers.

He'd only get bitter if he did.

Chapter End Notes

considered not posting today. sometimes people can be rude. hm. whatever. i've had a fun time playing omori. just got past the prologue.

have a nice day. night. all that.

xxiv. all things turn to rust by and by / and that's fine

Chapter Summary

Techno goes out for a day on the town. Techno fans, similarly, are out in droves. Wilbur and Tommy just have a good time.

(Or: When there are people striving their hardest to copy your exact appearance, blending into the crowd is barely something of note.)

Chapter Notes

[chapter title from "the sermon of sister rust" by jack de quidt]

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

How did one act like a fan? Did he appear all excited that the one and only *Blade* could possibly be out and about? Did he actively approach any who looked like him, even remotely, and ask if they were...himself?

“You’re thinking about it too much, bitch,” Tommy told him very...*matter-of-factly* as they started their venture, already out on the sidewalks. Techno, with his hood up to guard from a slight chill, was only getting one or two views as they went by- but most seemed to dismiss him and pass over him. *Nice.* “Just act yourself.”

Like *that* was a foolproof way to not be discovered.

Tommy was so *dumb* sometimes.

Crowds, just like before, set his nerves on fire. He stared and spun and held onto at least one of his brothers at all times, feeling almost like a speck of dust amidst the swarm. Thankfully, the crowds thinned out soon enough, giving him enough space to let his stressed, stuttering heart calm down a little. The main roads were the true culprits, the veins of the city that spread out from the center. Even with waypoints, they couldn’t reach everywhere without making the city implode- so they walked.

And walked.

And *walked*.

Once, he imagined if he thought hard enough about it, there had been things that people drove around on to get around in the middle of the street. If he remembered correctly- which

was almost like a joke, come to think about it, *remembering*- Techno was pretty sure that was only a staying invention in the first wave of servers, all ancient beyond belief by now. Why use something like that when you could use a waypoint, or the public transportation that Wilbur and Tommy led him to?

“So *I* fucking hate these,” Tommy declared as soon as he stepped into the box that was waiting on the edge of a platform, flowing into it with everyone else that had been waiting. “Like, they go to the places that are in the middle of waypoints but it’s so annoying! You showed me this place we’re going to like, three years ago, and it was *so horrible* getting there. You enjoyed it, of course, but I swear to—“

“*Inside voice*, Tommy.”

“You can’t tell me what to do! I’m a *law-abiding guest* of the server and I will *not* be treated like—“

“Tommy,” Wilbur said, all sing-song like, “nobody around you appreciates the little outburst. We love you, little child, we do, but save it for home!”

“Fuck you,” Tommy muttered. “You’re the *worst*, Wil. Be more like your other fuckin’ brother here. Quiet.”

“I love you too!”

Truth be told, Techno thought he could see the beauty in the transport from where he stood woodenly, staring out the window as the box ran along quietly on a track throughout the city. Where once he had been staring at countless high-rises, smaller and smaller buildings started to pop up until they had left the richer parts of the city behind.

Well. Not *quite*- but the more eye-searing parts, with every inch covered by advertisements, perhaps.

He could see plants. Trees. More varied architecture. It was...refreshing.

When they got off, three stops later, Techno marveled at the sights, the sounds, the smells that surrounded him without worrying about other people for a second.

What *was* it about the outdoors? What was it about the pop of green that soothed something in him, even if it was an urban landscape with green spots carefully chosen? Around here, there were less people packed into one space, but...that wasn’t it. He could see a sparrow. Could see a cat staring at him judgmentally from the window of a building, tail flicking wildly as it sat and watched.

It was just as...hi-tech as the rest of the server, but *muted*. Perfect little store after perfect little store lined the streets, interrupted by a place of prayer or a small park or some other public feature or small entry to private residences. There was still a polished feel that made everything seem *lacking*, in some way- but it looked more lived in, too.

The duality of some parts of Hypixel baffled him. (Had they baffled whoever had used this body last?)

Techno rubbed at his eyes. When he opened them again, his brothers stood there, patiently waiting. Or- as much as they could be, given Tommy's rabbit-tap of an irritated foot.

"...Maybe the outing isn't as bad as I thought it'd be," he allowed, rolling his eyes when both Wilbur and Tommy cheered. *Bunch of overexcited kids. Not like one's older than me or anything.* "Honestly, you'd think that you two are the ones out here for the first time..."

"It's not *your* first time either, come, come here, we're nearly there!"

It is my first time here, Techno felt tempted to retort, but eventually he just shook his head and sighed at it all. It wasn't like the semantics mattered, not to them, but. Well. It mattered to him.

But his body knew the path they were walking. It made his stomach growl, made him long for...for good food. For cakes and coffee and tea and floral accents.

He followed them quietly.

The place they took him to was a cafe.

What a surprise.

The Techno that showed them these places is alien to me, no matter the memories that I get. If he let himself try and remember, he could taste fruit on his tongue. Could smell tea, pastries, sweets. Could feel his own hand quietly resting on Tommy to keep him quiet as he told an employee his order. *That was not me, can't you see? How many times has this been a topic of conversation? When will you realize that that was truly not me, and you are mistaken in more ways than one about it all?*

It was all *airy* and *light* and Techno could taste the fruit of a tart again in his mouth, knew that if he let his nostrils flare that he could smell the baking pastries and the general sweetness of the room. Soft chatter filled the room, people sitting in seats that seemed more inclined for beauty than for comfort, and there was something inside of Techno that murmured: *This is not you, this is not you, this is not you. This is for show.*

Places like these, no matter how good the food, are always for show if it's guiding a brother around the server to what they might think are the best spots.

Which wasn't entirely surprising, if he were being honest with himself.

The line was nearly out the door, which was strike one. Standing in a line for the better part of ten to fifteen minutes or more was...not his idea of a good time. Tommy seemed genuinely excited, though, right next to Wilbur who seemed like he was at least looking forward to whatever he'd be getting. Techno felt out of place. A square peg in a round hole.

...There were three people who looked like him in this room.

When he pointed it out to Wilbur, his brother nearly snorted himself into reeling backwards against Techno. When Tommy was told- well, it was a duo effort on the part of Wilbur and him to keep the kid quiet.

“That one’s probably the best out of the bunch,” Wilbur murmured to him when Tommy’s laughter died down, dipping his head towards someone who was wearing a cape, a crown, long pink hair (wig? Dyed? Who knew?) tied into a low bun. They were talking with someone else, a regular-looking person if not for a little crown pin on their shirt-

Oh. That was why Wilbur had said they were the closest to reality- almost real-looking tusks were laying on the table, clearly waiting to be put back on the first person after they ate, and their ears were long, their eyes dark and quite possibly a reddish shade. Not that he’d get any closer to confirm that.

But it looked...almost eerily close to what he looked like, if not for the flawless makeup they had, the tusks on the table (and on a napkin), the laughing friend that rung absolutely no bells to him.

Maybe it did look like what he had looked like, if you counted the makeup.

He watched them for a second more and sighed when someone walked up to the person to compliment them.

Techno turned back to face the blackboard at the counter with the menu and steadfastly tried to think about what he wanted to get instead of the various people in this one room who looked similar to him.

And he was not going to put the hood of his hoodie down. He would *not*. He *refused*.

No matter how much the time drug on and made him feel awkward.

Tommy got something painfully sweet, something that even Techno knew was an impending toothache as he received it. Wilbur’s order wasn’t much better, even if a little snack he got was of the savory sort- he snorted softly and ordered a mocha latte, nursing the drink alone as they slowly circled their way out.

It was nice. Hot. A bit bitter even with the chocolate, which kept him a bit more alert than he would have been otherwise. He peered at the cosplayers as he left and tilted his head, checked the communicator-

Not any more new news about him except for a few posts marveling at the fact that people were pulling back out all of their Techno things.

Special rerun of the Best of Techno’s King’s Duels, an advertisement chimed happily in his head for an announcements section, and he batted it away with a sharp frown and a flick of his pointer finger.

“And his whole catchphrase,” he caught at the corner of his hearing as they left, “or, well, what everyone else says- *Techno never dies*. And I’m pretty sure that he-“

“He never died?”

Techno stilled. Gave a long blink. Wilbur pulled him further along so he wasn’t blocking the entrance.

“So, we’re going to—“

It was too late for Wilbur to distract him. The statement had already wound its way into hellish repetition in his head.

He was gone.

There was a kid in front of him that painfully reminded him of who he used to be.

“Techno n’eva dies,” they declared cheerfully, holding up a sword and beaming at him to grin and bare two very clearly fake, plastic tusks. A pink wig, a little crown, a little cape-

“I’m getting younger every day,” he deadpanned, nodding to where the kid was standing behind the roped away crowd. The assistant shadowing his steps snorted softly into their communicator. He smiled faintly and watched as the crowd went wild at the statement, at the few scraps of information and humor that he’d dole out like a parent sparingly giving away candy to children.

Predictable. That’ll be all over social media in a few minutes.

“You’re expected at the meet and greet in ten minutes,” they told him, quiet enough to not carry but loud enough to be heard over the din of constant screaming and yelling at him. “As per company policy, you—“

“Have to be there for the allotted minimum time, I know,” he snorted. “This...ain’t my first rodeo, believe me.”

He waved to the crowd. Winked at the kid. Watched as a sea of regular people, pink wigs, and genuinely dyed hair bobbed back at him. There were *far* too many crowns.

Tacky. Maybe I should see if I’m allowed to change the aesthetic.

Still a teenager, even if he’d age out of it in another year or two, and people imitated him like this.

“I never said it was,” the assistant demurred. “I was just...company policy.”

“...I get it. I really do.” The side of his mouth twitched upwards a little more as he sent a message to their communicator with a twitch of his fingers.

What a shitshow, I know. New?

A nod.

At least it's not the worst job you could have gotten with them.

A beat. A pause.

They never sent him a message back.

The two of them kept on walking, one world-renowned and the other nameless, away from the crowd and into a waiting room.

The fans could just be patient and wait to see him again for another nine minutes, couldn't they? They'd have him all they wanted, then, until he was ushered away for whatever else they had on his schedule.

He just wanted to go home.

He just wanted to rest.

But the luck of the draw had given Techno this, so, well. It seemed like a few hours of letting himself run on bored autopilot was ahead of him.

Lucky me.

The next place they took him to was stunning, when he could blink himself into reality enough to process things. It was something to gape at, a place with a line that they cut with something that Wilbur flashed- *[MVP++]*, his mind murmured, *you got him that, good job, good job-* and treated them like honored guests.

Faintly, he thought of ritzy dining rooms and of forms and of stilted conversation- but he could still taste the mocha drink that he had discarded somewhere along their journey, so he focused on that and let the impressions of memories slide past, refused to let them catch a hold on him.

No, this was...

What even *was* this place?

He stopped, a few strides in, and just stared. Tommy pulled him further along.

“This is...”

“An aquarium,” Wilbur said, almost preening himself with how pleased he looked. “You showed me this two years ago, and it’s *probably* the best place of all. Even the cafe that Tommy loves is worse. Even Tommy’s real favorite place- the *arenas*- are worse. An aquarium with fish from this world and all of the ones mainly connected to it as well as some from other regions of the universe- tell me it isn’t cool, these little fuckers, the way they swim around and shit.”

“It’s very cool,” he told Wil, and let himself be pulled along as he examined the tanks and tried to find what he felt was a missing puzzle piece. There wasn’t anything he could find, not concrete or real proof to his mild thoughts, but he could almost feel something going on.

This wasn’t a place that Techno had loved.

It was a place that the past him had told Wilbur he loved just so Wilbur would go along and fall in love with it instead.

If he were willing to bet money, he was pretty sure he’d get his money back and then some if he thought that it was likely for him to have shown Tommy the cafe just because of a certain item they had, or places around the area, and acted like he really loved it above all else.

Techno wondered how many other places they thought he loved. How many places they imagined he’d like just because a previous self had said something about it.

Stronger impressions came to mind- names. *Milo. New Milo. Sally.* They echoed in his mind a half-beat before Wilbur pointed specific fish out, looking giddy that he had spotted them at all.

If he focused hard enough, he could remember a slightly different scene, one where he was shorter, one where Wilbur’s hair didn’t curl just so-

“We’ll call this one Milo,” Wilbur decided, “and the smaller one New Milo- oh, oh, look over there, now she’s a beauty, there’s no way her name isn’t Sally-“

“Sally? Really? Out of all the names that you could have chosen?”

“Well, what would you choose, dumbass? Don’t tell me something like Joe or, gods forbid, Carl.”

“...”

“You really were going to suggest something like that, you little-“

“Wilbur, hey-“

Techno thought about memories. About reminders. About the way that the light overhead had filtered onto them, reflected off from the water and playing on them in much the same way that the lights of the city adored in his apartment, no matter the location- what he had now, or the harsh red that peeked into his vision from something even hazier, something even smaller and dingier.

That was something for another time. He rolled his shoulder. Ignored the twinge of old and newer wounds and scars alike.

“You know,” he mused, “Sally really could have used a better name than...Sally.”

“Oh, don’t you start on that again, I *swear*-“

There came a point at their adventure when Techno couldn’t tell the time. It wasn’t like it mattered, since it was a click away in his head through the communicator, but the liminal space they were in seemed to lend itself well to uncertainty. To chance. He considered it after the third space they went to, a too-clean store where his brothers pointed out some things he had at home and other things he had shown them on their first time there- and he wondered.

He wondered where he would go, if his legs were allowed to wander. Did he still know the most frequent paths he took? Would he be willing to trudge straight back across the city for something more, for something special?

What even qualified as special, when all of your interests were helped along with blood money?

...Probably not the best term, upon further consideration.

But. Wilbur and Tommy, upon hearing his musings, seemed...*thoughtful*. They stared at him and texted someone- Phil, he presumed- and upon some message, they both grinned and looked back to him and both motioned as if they were opening up some kind of grand walkway to him.

“After you, your Highness,” Tommy snickered.

...He didn’t even have the crown that people were cosplaying on his head. He didn’t even have his hair tied in some interesting way.

Everything would be fine. He was just another tired, dedicated fan if anyone asked. He knew all of the bits, sure. He knew every debut and tournament and everything.

Sure, he did.

(It struck him, a bit, the thought of fans and superfans- all who knew so many of the facts that had made up a part of the whole. So many facts that he still didn’t know, too scared to search them up online and have them rush him.

He rather thought that he didn’t want to dwell on it any further.)

“I’m not your monarch,” he said dryly, and lead the way into the unknown.

"Fuck you, Techno. Prick."

Techno's ear flicked as he tilted his head to the side, turning lightly to see Wilbur approaching with a wry smile. They were both awake in the middle of the night, although only Techno was supposed to be up, and he glanced back down to the sword in his hands, up to the world around them, and didn't look back at Wilbur's unreadable face.

"Supposed to be sleepin'," he said gruffly, moving from his relaxed position to something more at attention, better to observe the terrain, their half-built house, their server that wasn't even a week old. "Watch changes in five, not now."

"Phil didn't apply for the license." Wilbur was quiet, for a moment, as if that would coerce an answer- and then he snorted. "I mean, maybe he did, maybe a few months ago when he started talking about it. But...that shit can take years, Techno. Not. Not months."

"Wilbur."

"Techno."

He sheathed his sword and turned to look at the landscape behind them, the treeline so close by. It was a few beats before he swung his bow off of his back and took aim, brought the arrow close, reached for it-

And that was another spider dead. He could collect the arrow in the morning.

"I don't even know how licenses work," he said, the exhaustion seeping through his voice, his quiet nature sturdy and still under Wilbur's gaze. It was true, even. Always truth. Sure. "My name carries a lot, sure. And I'm pretty sure we're all registered as brothers. Probably someone wantin' to get on my good side."

We can even push people up in the queue for licenses, a former whisper sounded in his ear. He flicked it. Drew the bow up again at a flicker of movement. Stared dispassionately as a spider fell right next to its brethren, dumb as could be.

It's the least we could do for our star, right? A few years with us already, and you're still climbing...Maybe you could go for a sweep of the main records at some point, huh?

...A sweep of the main records.

What, you can't do it? Should we let the queue stay as is? I mean, that flagged application in the system...

Really.

"On your good side," Wilbur echoed. "The fuck's that supposed to mean?"

“Do you not look at the internet? At advertisements and shows and interviews and their tournaments?”

“...Bit busy tourin’.”

He had taken time out of his schedule to come here, to help build. Given, he was maybe with his family before all this about half the time and there the other half- but Quartz had been steadily increasing his time there.

Maybe he was due to get a new place. A new apartment, one that wasn’t cramped and annoying and well, well below the means he now had.

Really, Techno.

...What’re the main ones, again? The records?

“I’m getting better,” he said woodenly. “At fighting. Maybe you should take a look at my events one day.”

“Fuck you.”

“Your music’s good.”

A long pause.

Good lad.

Techno sighed. Rolled his shoulders and stretched just so, his bones popping with a loud sound, an exhaustion running stronger than ever through them.

“...Get some sleep, Techno. I’ll start my watch early. I’ll just wake you up later.”

He snorted. Softly.

“Not a chance, Wil.”

“Well, *gods*, you could let me be the nice guy for *once* in my life-“

“Bed. Now.” He shooed Wilbur away with a lazy hand, not looking back over at him. He refused to look. Refused to deal with more emotion than he could handle at that moment. “I’ll wake you in the five hours.”

“...Night.”

He just huffed. Listened to the footsteps go away.

A rattling appeared at the edge of his hearing. He spun, loosed an arrow, and went running after the skeleton that had appeared right by the water, discarding the bow in favor of his sword. Arrows were *terrible* with them, swords okay, if only he had an *axe*—

Later, he woke Wilbur with a searing ache crawling through his bones, various bits of monster gunk coating him, and melted onto the floor of their temporary hidey-hole while their home was built to pass out for the rest of the night.

At least dreams didn't like to come when he exhausted himself to sleep.

So far, *the unknown* just seemed to entail a lot of aimless walking and waiting.

But. They were having fun. Or, he assumed they were.

As much as it surprised him, really, they were having fun. Techno mostly stayed quiet, watching and listening to the banter between Wilbur and Tommy, but they included him easily, not falling back as completely on in-jokes as they had when they had first seen him without knowing how deep the amnesia went. He entered and exited the conversation as he pleased, and they constantly got sidetracked by this or that thing. Techno had a whole conversation on exactly what a vending machine was, watching people operate it and get... hot cans of coffee and tea out of it.

They were both very, very amused at him.

As it turned out, the machine *did* have lavender tea, and it was almost enough to have him hum happily as he let his legs take him and his brothers to a different train that went a completely different route through the city.

Muscle memory let his hand ghost over a tile as he pinged his communicator. A second later, he was allowed to the platform. When Tommy and Wilbur did much the same, they just tapped their communicators on it and off they went.

Lovely. Useful.

He had no clue what he had just done, but it was fine. That just...had to be the way the world worked.

The train even had *new* things that didn't make his memory perk up like an alert watchdog—something like a little jingle that played when the doors opened, Tommy's voice commenting on everyone he saw even if they heard him, a baby screaming loud enough to hurt his ears, landscapes out the window changed just enough that it didn't spark too much.

It was also- *quite* the cold day, now that he had the time to realize it. It had been fine enough when he was walking and inside a building, but the stop-start nature of their newfound explorative drive left him getting cold as he stood to look at a cat from afar or watch someone perform in the street as they whizzed by. His feet and void-filled memories were taking him somewhere, sure, but they weren't exactly in a hurry, especially with him getting more sluggish the colder he was.

They could take the scenic route.

It was fine. It was more than fine, in fact- as he slowly released from his shell, his shoulders loosened, his posture relaxed. Sure, he tightened up again every time he saw someone with pink hair, with a red cape, any of it- but it was lighthearted. It was, dare he say it again, actually *fun* despite a growing feeling that he was a half-step sideways from reality and growing further apart from it.

With his brothers in tow, he found his way to a little hole in the wall restaurant, barely enough room to move around without bumping into a table or chair, even with the straight line to the counter. Techno shoved his hands into his pockets and looked up for a menu- and found none.

But...his mouth was watering at the smell of seasoned meat, of meals well taken care of, the slightly broken down looking room and plastic containers handed out to customers nothing compared to the way that it brought things back, a particular scent hitting just so as he glanced across the counter to see a man staring straight back at him-

In another time, Techno stood there with a defeated posture, a sharp frown on his face, alone and with a beanie on his head, hands tucked into jean pockets and a scarf wrapped around his neck. He stepped forward to order, foot tapping idly on the ground, and let himself smile with his eyes at the person who greeted him.

The man who stared back, big and beefy, grinned.

“If it-“

“-ain’t my long-lost brother,” the person greeted heartily, making Techno blink as the memory layered over the reality, as he stepped up and gaped and looked back at Wilbur and Tommy, both of which looked as astonished as he did.

Brother?

“Hell-ooo,” he said awkwardly, letting his posture hunch a little more as the man laughed.

“Long time no-“

“-see,” the man finished, grinning and leaning over the table to wink at him. He looked back behind him to see...no line. “Our favorite regular indeed, even if you’re not here as often as the others, huh?”

“Of course,” Techno murmured. Adjusted his scarf, thankful for the fact that they never asked the questions that others would. “I...”

“No need to say anythin’,” he said agreeably, winking just a bit. “We’ll just be going ahead and gettin’ you your regular, extra-“

“-sauce on the side like usual?”

A blink. Two blinks. Nothing had quite triggered a split-second flash in his memory like *that* in him before, and he had to mull it over for a second, staring at him before he inclined his head ever so slightly, before he gave into the urge to just let his body do what felt right and let himself step even further sideways on the scale of his control.

“Hey, no worries,” they chuckled. “Figured you’d not wanna talk, even now. And are these two people with ya? Friends or somethin’?”

“...Something,” he eventually said. Left it at that.

“And what’ll y’all be wanting?”

Techno felt himself drift as they answered, as the man behind the counter gave him a wink (and a ping to Techno’s communicator that he answered with a flick of the hand to pay) and went to the back to holler something unintelligible at those working there. There was a short cheer- and when he came back out, he ushered them to the one little rickety table still available and gave a lazy, almost-mocking salute as they sat down to wait. He watched as he motioned for the next group to come forward and give their order.

“So,” Tommy said.

“So,” Techno replied, once again reverted to a stranger in his own body.

“...What the hell was *that*?”

“I don’t know,” he said tiredly, leaning forward to put his face in his hands, let himself revel in the fact that the scarf he had stuffed into his hoodie’s big pocket was the exact same as the one in the memory that had cut into what he was doing. “I don’t...I’ve been here. Before.”

“I can tell that,” Wilbur said, rolling his eyes, “but we haven’t even heard about it!”

"I don't think I ever told you all," he murmured, a bit slurred behind the tusks, unwilling to look at the two of them. His mind drifted to more things- how many places had he gone without even thinking of his brothers? What was the difference between the places he told them about and the places that he had actually frequented, like this?

Despite its cramped and busy atmosphere, he felt safe here. Cozy. *Relaxed*. The man hadn't said his name once, even though he clearly knew who he was and had pinged his communicator for wordless payment, and it was a relief for him to know that there were people that remembered him after so long but didn't fucking *push* on anything he didn't *want* pushed-

That was being too unfair to his brothers. That was rude to them when he didn't have to be, even though it was only in his head. Techno groaned and sighed it out, just sitting there until they realized that it wasn't really worth it, bugging him more like this when he was only half-paying attention to their nagging at him.

They left him be.

Techno relaxed further.

The food, packed into three different plastic containers, was absolutely delicious, meat and vegetables and a sauce to compliment it that was divine, despite the hastily thrown together appearance it carried- as was the bag of hastily made desserts that were plopped onto the table as they begun to finish.

People, as it turned out, could be more kind than they were terrifying- even when they knew something. They could keep secrets. They could look at him and recognize him on sight even when there were other people who looked so similar- and they didn't snitch.

They only looked at him kindly and said things like *these are on the house, we whipped your favorite up for ya real quick, thanks for comin' back* and left him in the dust of their arrival feeling like he had just been given a hug without any of the tactile sensations of it.

Utter strangers.

He wished he remembered who they even were.

Chapter End Notes

finished the main routes of omori with the exception of the one that branches off real early on. sadge.

i hope people don't lose patience with the pace of this fic. thank you for sticking around.

xxv. we can build a land from the ground up

Chapter Summary

Techno starts a slow, wandering sort of hunt. Recipes from worn notebooks are found and tested. In another world, things would be simple (and all the better for it).

(Or: Aimlessly chasing one goal isn't always the best course of action, but what can you do when there's no firm, set path?)

Chapter Notes

[chapter title from "from the ground up" by laura shigihara]

slight tw for dissociation

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

There was only so much time in the day for exploration. When they went back home, Techno passed out on the couch with a tired snuffle, not even taking the hoodie off in his mire of exhaustion. When he next woke, he mindlessly paced around until they all went out again-and he *wandered*.

He wasn't one to leave on a whim, but there was something driving his steps, now. There was something that perked up and breathed in and said yes, this is your purpose at this very moment, and you will fulfill it to your last breath and you will enjoy it.

Maybe the last part was a bit too much- but he was driven. Even Tommy and Wilbur could realize that, as bemused as they were by Techno suddenly taking the lead on explorations.

Almost none of what they saw were things they had seen before. Go figure.

They found a botanical garden that was hi-tech in parts and utterly rustic in others. The people who worked the place seemed to find him familiar, but not enough for something to click- he breathed in the green and the life and just wandered, marveling at it all, at the sprigs of Hypixel lavender and their unique scent compared to what would grow at home, rare and unseen varieties specific to Hypixel and any other number of special servers slotted right next to the run of the mill varieties that looked so different.

He breathed it all in and let a memory of coming here before filter in.

Memories came. Memories went. If they were correct in what they told him, this had once been funded by rich CEOs of companies based outside of Hypixel before those that worked there reclaimed it, local gardeners and employees and regular plant enthusiasts building it up to the celebration of life it was today and keeping it open to all that would visit.

(A quieter memory whispered about sticking it to the man. About pulling a middle finger to companies and to capitalism and-

Techno stopped that train of thought. He was getting almost anxious about that enough for his brothers to notice.

That would be- bad, he suspected.)

He thought, perhaps, that if he had been able to farm in this part of the server freely in the space where they kept a rotating vegetable garden, he would have frequented this place even more often.

Techno brought them to esoteric spaces. Liminal spaces. Wandered until he found little shitty-looking but utterly *amazing* food stalls and stores, browsed through tiny thrift shops, found curiosities and wonders that were far from the cleanest spaces in the city. He breathed in and felt a little like he was regaining a proper foothold in the world, even if he took a step back every time someone warmly commented on his ‘Techno cosplay’.

Yeah. What a great cosplay. His tusks were realistic. His hair was a shade off, apparently. (How could he be a shade off from his own hair?) He seemed just as utterly unamused as ‘the real Techno’ was sometimes.

He flatly thanked them and moved on, shedding the griminess that spread over him every time a conversation like that happened.

There were good parts of Hypixel, as it turned out. Technoblade remembered arriving at any number of these places when he was tired, worn out, withdrawn from social contact enough to roam the streets. Remembered the way that he would find himself rejuvenated or relaxed at the end of his time spent there, finally relaxed enough to breathe a little easier almost always no matter the circumstance. He remembered blood crusting underneath his fingernails, under his gloves as he hunched over and examined plants from a completely different world, and feeling a little less like he had to scrub his hands raw when he got home.

Techno remembered wandering until he couldn’t remember the reason he had left in the first place, anger turning to interest that turned to a wanderlust that was sated before he finally went back to his apartment.

His brothers didn’t know this part of him, wouldn’t ever know it all even if he was revealing it right in front of their eyes. Even *he* didn’t entirely know of it, could barely explain it to them all- but it was a balm to dreams of unexplained embroidery and fighting until he was the last one left. Of some kind.

He gave them a bland explanation to all their questions on the topic that pacified them, that got them smiling at him and him grimacing quietly back before they left for another place,

his fingers tracing the edges of everything he found remotely interesting.

Just places I must have gone to once or twice before, he told them, mild as milk despite the way that he could feel it in his bones, could feel it in the strong lavender scenting of his clothing that he had been to these places multiple, multiple times. *Just once or twice, not for really any particular reason.* Nothing that he was running from.

But.

That was what these places were, right? *Balms*.

Balms worked best when they had a burn to soothe.

It was impossible, really, to escape the nightmares. It was impossible to tell whether they were feverish dreams of things he wished would never be proven or if they were true, damning memories.

Techno panted and gored someone with his tusks in one, ripped them to shreds with a guttural scream rising out of him and his hands curled into almost clawing motions, hunched over the body to stare at a person who dared try to approach him, going for the eyes a split second after his body sprung back into movement-

Techno yelled at someone in the rough, clashing syllables of the piglin language as he chased them, predator hunting prey until it tripped and couldn't get up and he fell upon them with abandon, made sure they were good and dead before he rose and took the crown that was rightfully his-

He climbed over bodies to reach a goal. He tore someone down by their hair and cast them aside, making sure his cloak stayed pristine on his way up.

He grabbed and he growled and he made them *stay down*.

There was no escaping the Blood God.

There was no missing the way that he pulled out a heart, examined it, let it pulse in its hand before he huffed and cast it aside. What would be seen by those who watched, in what he hazily remembered of cameras floating above? Would it be a cartoonish heart? Would it simply be him examining the blood that was now staining his fingers? Would they shy away from the truth again this time just like they did last time, last time, every time before that?

On the other side of the coin of his dreams:

Techno stared down a person in a crisp suit, their hand holding a swirling glass of whiskey. He sipped his lavender tea, put the lukewarm mug down, and demanded that they relax and alter a part of his contract.

Or I'll just leave and you'll be out your star performer.

He was denied.

Of course.

The world shifted ten steps every time he was in a dream- one moment an adult in a chair and the next standing years before out on a balcony. He sipped mildly at his sparkling water while all those around him partook of champagne, of wine, of various drinks to whet their appetite and *loosen up*. Despite that, the eyes of the person to his left were sharp. Intelligent.

"I'd like to offer you a deal," they said, his recollection distorted by the haze of sleep.

A half-step sideways in reality and Techno looked at a contract in a sleepy funk from his couch, too tired to think straight about red lines scrawled onto it that were months old by then. Thought of what came before.

He thought of it and then suddenly he was *there*, shorter than anyone else by merit of just being out of his tween years but not any less dangerous because of it, and squared his shoulders to speak with the *adults* walking by. Phil had taught him proper language. Had taught him to speak his words precisely and not how he had spoken for the first year or two or three he had spent with Phil and Wilbur. The person that had approached him after he won this battle was smart. Mindful.

He accepted their outstretched hand before he even knew what it stood for, whirled into paper, contract, lights, camera, action and he was there and he was drowning and suddenly there was a new barrier between him and Phil and-

What were refuges if not escapes from reality? What was the botanical garden if not a temporary balm to the anathema that was his battling, to the way that he ended up wrapped around the fingers of money-hoarding people from the moment he was seen as something even *approaching* noticeable?

Were these all false nightmares or were they terrifying memories in truth?

...Techno thought he could tell what the answer was upon waking up, details blurred but still *recognizable*. It left him staggering into the bathroom to throw up in the middle of the night, choking down the louder noises as to have no chance of waking up anyone or alerting his brothers if they were already in the living room or the kitchen.

What *was* Hypixel, if deep down he could see part of its heart, its underbelly, for what it really seemed to be?

What was he, if he had been here for a good seven, eight, nine years of his life? Was time real? Had he left because of exactly what he was remembering in all the horrible flashes and snippets? Was the good- the hideaways, the little secret places he kept for himself, the embroidery, Teach- just temporary patches on a gaping, weeping wound?

Nightmares chased dreams that chased memories that once again chased nightmares.

No matter how much good he found wandering, it would always come back to the horrible, slowly uncovered reality of what exactly he had become.

The wanderlust in him made the hybrid walk around the city one day and try to escape nightmares in night, unable to tell the exact time unless he grasped at it with a twitch of his fingers for his communicator to show the time. Techno wandered, not always able to tell the difference between reality, memory, and dream, fingers bumping up against the walls as he tried to breathe and reach the surface.

Techno simply *stood*, some nights, in the training room when sleep wouldn't come easily or something had woken him up. He stood there, cloak folded neatly on a bench near the door, and tried to fish for who he used to be, who he was now, who he wanted to be in the future.

That line of thought came up empty.

He fell into sloppy stances when he couldn't sleep, acted out the moves of his memories as if he were chasing them into oblivion in the exercising room. His fists landed upon empty space, but he still found himself gasping at the end of a half-remembered routine, caught by the feeling of actually succeeding in an actual fight with the same attack.

Techno found himself slowly remembering the consequences of those moves. Of those actions.

What kind of a person had he been, in truth? What kind of a world had he lived in if he had fallen head first into business, into death, into killing for sport as soon as he entered the world?

And how much did Phil actually know about it all?

How much did he really *know* about it all, come to think of it? He could remember flashes of well-dressed and finely postured people, of obscured paperwork and requests for one thing or another, but nothing much came of it but a deep well of dread and disgust and no concrete, properly damning memories of corporations and shareholders and Quartz Entertainment's greedy gaze. He could remember fighting and coming out of a frenzied bloodbath with nothing but the blood and remains of others on him, but he couldn't always tell that apart from dreams where he did much the same thing.

Techno was surrounded by things that he had to second-guess. He couldn't be sure of how deep he had gone, how far the rabbit hole went- did he feel disgusted at businessmen and corporate actions because something had happened to him, or was it for a reason specific to a small situation that he couldn't pinpoint? Had this or that battle actually happened? Had he truly been trapped in something from the beginning or was he thinking about shows he had watched, or about his family, or about, about, about-

Where was the *real* Techno, amongst all of the garbage, pushing through all of the muck?

He chased those nightmares with reckless abandon, the ones that chased dreams that chased memories and he tried to devour them all, and tried to eat them all up so he could decipher the real from the false, the truth in the fog.

Techno knew that his brothers were noticing his lapses, the times when he'd space out and not answer, the times where his hands ghosted over objects without any kind of a purpose to it as his body piloted itself. There was no getting around it.

He pushed himself further.

Some days were still kept inside. They were light, they were soft- his brothers milled about and he did the same, contemplating things that he couldn't quite tell the origin of under the orders of Phil to 'not rush it'. Sometimes, his body beckoned him to fall into a practiced fighting stance or to clean the kitchen, to tidy up his wardrobe in an organizational pattern that he couldn't quite figure out. Other times, he thought of going through his communicator messages and inbox yet again- but he shied away each and every time, the number of messages already very high and still, even without him checking them, slowly crawling higher in count.

He thought of the person labeled only *Teach* in the same daisy chain of thoughts that he traveled along, a line of gore caused by tournaments and an audience's desire to see blood and nothing more, a sponsor's desire to see that carried out right alongside quiet moments of calm, right alongside visiting the botanical center and drifting yet again.

(*Sponsors*. What a funny term, one that he couldn't get all straight in his head. What did money matter in truth when you didn't live there? Why had he signed any of it, why had he trapped himself, why-

Nevermind. That thread of thought was long gone by now)

He thought of enchanting clothing through thread. Relived days of sitting back and running a needle and thread back and forth through something, not comprehending the components as he worked but remembering and admiring the whole of what it turned into in his mind's eye even as what rested in the hands of the present was a mess.

Techno went fishing through his various bits of storage to see if he could find the book that had been in his memories, the journal he himself had written about the enchantments. He tried to fish in stuffed drawers and pushed aside things inside of them, ignoring their contents in his quest, getting things everywhere, stacking bottles of ink, pushing aside expensive looking trinkets-

There-

...Oh.

Instead of a journal on embroidery and thread enchantments ending up in his hands, he found a notebook on...on *strategy*.

That was enough to sidetrack him- sidetrack him from thoughts and spirals of who he used to be, who he wanted to be, stopped him from thinking of all the bad and all he didn't know so that he could laser focus on the writing in his hands.

The chicken-scratch of his handwriting was abysmal. It was enough to make him raise his eyebrows and scratch a bit at his forehead, but...it wasn't all that hard to figure out, sitting on the edge of his bed and squinting just enough to make everything make sense of the scrawl, large in spots and cramped in others as he ran out of space on this, on that page.

Organization laid itself out in categories impossible to divine the meaning of at first glance, but a closer eye found painstakingly numbered according to the little page markings he had done wherever numbers were able to fit between the messy words and sidenotes and footnotes. They sat there and they did their job, even with how hard they sometimes were to find, and he ran his fingers over the dried pen markings, looked at all the categories for each competition Hypixel ran. Techno examined all of those and then more, little sections on different methods of fighting, different methods of seeking, different methods of the finer details of Hypixel's laws.

(*How many loopholes were, are there in Hypixel's net of rules*, he wondered, when he saw how large that category was-

He didn't particularly want to think on that. He continued on.)

He skipped past most of the Hypixel related content, went straight to the fighting- and let out a short breath as he saw *sketches*.

The previous him hadn't been anywhere close to being an artist, but the messy scribbles were matter-of-fact, just good enough to show form before they crumbled into lines too broad to comprehend, notes dotted around them. *For fighting someone taller*, one of them said, *and you only have your fists. Keep posture like this, make sure to keep the momentum and not let them have it- arc important*-

A few pages later, he found instructions on swordfighting- as if *that* were something he'd forget. (In a way, he supposed he had. That wasn't very comforting, but, well. Fighting wasn't very comforting, either.) They were less in the realm of teaching as he learned a new skill, though, and more like reminders of complicated techniques, mistakes that apparently he had been prone to making, notes on the way that competitors often responded to those moves.

Techno brought the book to the training room. Stretched. Let himself drop into one pose. Another. Checked himself in the mirror before he looked back at the book.

He was just as terrible as he must have been back then to start making some of these notes, now. What a thought.

Time passed, and Techno was, as always, a prisoner of change. He talked with his brothers every day over food, over drink, over lavender tea when he made it in the deep of night and his brothers were up. Wilbur, Tommy, even Phil- and no matter what reservations they seemed to have about parts of his exploration of his previous self, the little bits he did give them, fragments and tidbits of the little moments of calm and happiness, seemed to soothe their worries.

It's good that we let him go here, their expressions all seemed to say. *This was the best choice, in all reality. This is good, even with that incident with the tournament playback.*

Even with the spacing out.

He wasn't so sure of that read on them, but he doubted that *he* was exactly the right person to look at the people that had been- and were still- his family and see whatever they hid behind their eyelids.

...Or perhaps he was. It was, in all honesty, hard to tell.

In-between the nightmares and crippling self-doubt, it was like the person he was hunting to find more than traces of in his apartment kept leaving him little clues and notes. The autopilot that he went into seemed to have a penchant for picking up little things as he came properly to- the strategy and fighting notebook, a folder of scraps of paper with recipes hastily written upon them, ones that he tentatively tested out in the middle of the night to inevitably wake up his brothers with the smell of food.

Recipes. For *food*. For small, one-person sized snacks sometimes, but others for large batches that could be stored for days (or eaten by one ravenous younger brother at two in the morning) and even weeks.

For when you can't sleep, a few of them were annotated with- another copy of how he made lavender tea, this time with a few extra ingredients that seemed to be more for luxury than anything else. Another for a small snack on toast, a way to spice it up when he was too tired to do much. Another for easy but good macaroni and cheese elevated above a box recipe.

Techno tried his best. He really did. He tried to sleuth it all out. Tried to not choke on memories that he couldn't be entirely sure were just memories, tried to not cripple himself under the weight of the indirect expectations put on him by his family, by the wider world- but he was *fine*. It was all fine, the ever-changing schedule he had. It wasn't like the routine of potatoes was one of the few things keeping him truly sane at Phil's, not at all.

Not at all.

(He was so tired.)

Chapter End Notes

quackity's stream was VERY impressive. gosh.

apologies for skipping the last update without any real warning. haven't been very productive lately & just haven't been that hot mentally, although that might be a little obvious from previous notes. another sort-of filler chapter, although it's one i had fun writing. what's a character study without lingering overmuch on what someone's thinking and feeling?

next chapter should be a fun one. i hope yall look forward to it. again, apologies for the update skippin.

also we're past 100k now and im in hell

xxvi. the list of things i used to be / is longer than the list of things i am

Chapter Summary

The gang happens upon a particularly, uh, enlightening store in the midst of Hypixel's bustling streets. Tommy and Wilbur lose themselves in hysterics from afar. Techno is caught off guard by cosplay and particularly brazen capitalism.

(Or: Perhaps being thought of as a cosplayer is the best possible disguise you could have, especially when you don't feel at all like the person you used to be.)

Chapter Notes

[chapter title from "mineshaft" by dessa]

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The routine of potatoes and farming was *absolutely* one of the few things that had kept Techno sane in the private server. When he had been trapped there, it had been so easy to become apathetic, to sweep himself along to the beat of mindless farming and the labor that endlessly kept him going. He had submerged himself and come out of it with an appreciation for the sweat on his brow, the half-soaked clothes on his body on the few days in which that foginess cleared up enough for him to take a few days nice and slowly.

There was no such refuge here, not in the hard edges and blinding lights of the city- no set schedule, no set routine, nothing to cling to when everything else was foreign- even if the bad came paired with good. Memories were closer to him with every day, harder to tell apart from reality in the worst of times and idle daydreams at the best. There were tangible reminders of the life the past him had led- photos, a communicator's unchecked logs, little idiosyncrasies that made up his previous life in the apartment that just wouldn't come and fully reveal their workings to him.

If nothing else, Techno was at least focused on whatever he found himself doing at the moment. Or, rather, he was focused until another thing stole his focus, and another thing, and *another*, and he couldn't fucking go back to Phil's to farm and unwind with the routine because there was still so much he didn't *have* about himself-

He needed a distraction.

Otherwise, they'd find half of his hair pulled out in the shower drain and a permanently dazed expression on his face as his attention constantly got taken away, taken away, taken away. They'd find him worse for wear and wouldn't be able to even help.

Thankfully, a momentary distraction came in the form of yet another outing, one where Techno kept his hands in his pockets, kept his eyes wary, and let his breath form little puffs in the chilly air as he hunched over next to his brothers. They were wandering again, this time in the evening in the heart of the city (not that the light would let anyone know it was evening), letting himself bathe in colored light as he stuck close to his brothers.

"There's been a lot more talk, lately," Wilbur was telling him, and he tore himself from a skittish absentmindedness back to the situation at hand. Tommy was a few steps ahead, consumed by something on his communicator, and Wilbur was walking a little slouched over right next to Techno. "About, well, you know. *You*."

The last bit was whispered, almost like a little secret.

Techno hummed. Glanced around to see that absolutely nobody was invested in their quiet talking. They passed a store all about selling luxury soaps and *oh that was a lavender one, who cared about the conversation, he wanted that-*

After another twenty minutes, a load of Tommy's mulish complaining, Wilbur's well and truly amused commentary paired with a shopping bag full of lavender-scented bath and body supplies purchased, the topic was finally swung back around to.

"So, brother of mine," Wilbur hummed, hip-checking him lightly and making him stumble. "Media. Talk. *You*."

Techno blinked owlishly and looked over at Wilbur, who gave him a big old grin- or, well, a lopsided grin. A big one. Reluctantly, he tore himself away from reexamining his purchases like a dragon would examine new additions to its hoard, and stared directly at him.

"Yes," he said, a bit blankly. What, exactly, had Wilbur been talking about again? "Media. Me." He paused and thought a bit longer before he gave a soft *oh* around his tusks. "I haven't been...watching the news."

"They haven't really given it up." Wilbur slouched over a bit more before straightening and shrugging. "Thought it'd be something you want to know. Some company pricks up there talking about being 'hopeful' that something would happen. That their...their..." He lowered his voice, just another hair. "That their *Blade* would be back. A few people were even interviewed about it and everything. Prolly what they'd been hoping for not being immediately turned away as false, since nobody's come forward to say they made a hoax or something."

That left a...strange taste in his mouth. Bitter. Sour. Terrible.

"Really," he murmured.

“Really. And get a load of this- everywhere online, everywhere in the media they’re bringing back *Techno* this, *Blood God* that, all these compilations are resurfacing and people are getting hyped up again and-“

“Wait.”

Techno raised his hand between him and Wilbur. Reached forward and grabbed his arm when his brother kept going. His ears flicked lightly from under his hood, his frame stopping in the middle of the flow of people to stop and stare and look around.

He had seen *something*, just for a second, that caught his eye. A flash of pink and gold. It wasn’t a cosplayer that he had passed on the street for the millionth time that day. Instead, it was more like...like...

“*Tommy*,” he called out, a hair above a normal talking voice. From where he was ahead of them, Tommy looked back and paused when he saw Techno wasn’t moving. Wilbur, stopped by virtue of Techno grabbing him on the arm, stared at him quizzically.

“Uh- what...is it? Another fuckin’ store for soaps ‘n shit, or-“

“Look at that,” he said rather roughly, turning from what he was peering at to stare at them and then right back to where he had seen the flash- and, a second later, the crowd momentarily parted to show it to him again. “That. The- the little store-“

He maneuvered his way through the crowd roughly despite how passive he had been about foot traffic before, two brothers (and some muttered apologies to those they plowed through) in tow, and found himself adrift at the sight of...of...

Well.

It was almost too much for him to handle.

This- this *was* the right place, right? *This* was what he had seen while walking?

A quick glance up and down the other storefronts nearby confirmed it. This was...this was really it. He looked back.

His own face stared back at him, impassive and holier-than-thou.

A poster of him, all makeup-clad and hair styled, tusks gleaming, crown perched delicately on top of his head, thick, luminescent eyelashes and eyeshadow a veil to his dark gaze.

It was, if he had to describe it with one word in particular, *otherworldly*.

“What the hell,” he said. Out loud. “What. The hell.”

There was actual, genuine *merch* of him.

(Why was he even surprised, considering the idea of companies, of sponsorships, of media trying to sniff out his presence like bloodhounds, like-)

The...phrases on shirts had been common sense, sure. Not the kind of thing he'd think of when he thought 'merch', but it wasn't as if he remembered all that much about what merch was.

Until now. Until he was faced with many items of merch that were decidedly *not* shirts and hoodies and sweatpants, although that seemed to be a section of the store.

"*Oh,*" Wilbur breathed, and the three of them stared down what had to be a storefront almost completely full of...Techno merchandise. Or *mostly* full of Techno merchandise, to be fair to the images of others that he assumed were current contenders for whatever the server had going on as far as their tournaments and fighting went. One looked...familiar to one of the competitors of the show he had made Tommy and Wilbur stop on the television. "This is. *Wow.*"

Techno wanted to combust. He wanted to lay down and scream. He wanted to run right back to Phil's private server and drown in potatoes and lavender and honeyed milk and never come back up again.

He did no such thing. Instead, like any regularly sane person would, he went inside to examine what was his...his merchandise? *His?* Were they official of some kind? Were they knockoffs? What did he actually remember about such things?

Not much, as it turned out, even if that wasn't very surprising. His mind turned over terms that floated into his head to try and describe it and then spat them back out with a shrug. He stared at a little disc on top of something like a band and had a good squint at it before he was told by Tommy that it was "*something to hold your communicator if you actually use a regular one and aren't a fucking prick-*"

But then the store owner had glared at Tommy, and he had shut up with a very prompt click of the jaw at the lady's hard stare.

Much of the items seemed like they had been pulled out recently from some kind of back storage, which he honestly...wouldn't be too surprised by. But he was busy examining what had to be a very well-made figurine, something of him with a glimmering diamond-and-some-kind-of-dark-metal axe extended and cloak swishing around him, detailed within an inch of his life, and he was trying to figure out what it *reminded* him of.

What was tickling the back of his head? What tried to bubble up when he looked at six different mini-capsules of various...*things* related to him doing random things? What was trying to remind him it existed when he tilted his head, puzzled over pencils and pens with phrases that were probably attributed to him emblazoned on them?

There were other people there, of course. Other people cheerfully buying whatever took their fancy and chatting with each other and commenting on how they thought he had...returned.

Oh my god, look at these cards, they have to have been exclusive from his Crowning, gods, Jen, look-

You think anyone's seen him recently? I swear, like, I saw five people that could have been him today. Everyone's getting so into it.

I know, right? At this point, I think it was some kind of a ruse, but that forum post by the person at the Visions communications clinic...

Are you sure you're not just hooked on the memes about it?

Wow, those cards have to be so rare, behind a case and all-

There were some cosplayers among the bunch. One of them...looked very, very much like him.

Frightfully so.

He caught their eye on mistake. They both stared at each other, long and slow- Techno from underneath his hood, eyes widened slightly, and the stranger, a slightly open mouth widening to a slow smile.

The person dragged over their friend with a large grin, tusks smaller than his actual ones but still poking out of their mouth, and Techno caught himself cataloging every difference, every sour note, every little thing that was off (*or was it faithful in truth?*).

“Hey!” They sounded- cheerful. *Bubbly*. Their voice was high-pitched, so utterly unlike his that it made him double-take to see it coming from someone who looked eerily similar to... himself. Sure, the hair was a shade off, the scars were a little altered and the facial structure was slimmer, but...*huh*. “Nice cosplay, man! Are you excited about his appearance, too? Man, I thought all the hype died out when he announced he was leaving, but nobody’s refuted the claim that was made the other week, like, *damn-*“

“...Yeah,” he said when they finally gave him room to talk, blinking wildly. How did one actually *talk* to people like this? Perhaps more importantly, how had he managed to avoid the bulk of such conversations until now? ...And what had been that ‘announcement’? “I’m, ah. I’m very excited for him to maybe be back. Take back the...crown.” Techno nodded towards the accessory perched on their head in a mimicry of the poster he had seen just a few minutes ago. “Yours is. Yours is nice, too.”

“Aw, thanks!” Their laugh was like a bright, lovely chime as they leaned on their friend, who thankfully looked normal except for a...Techno-related shirt. *Blood for the Blood God*, apparently, which was. The exact same thing as what Tommy was wearing at that exact moment. And other garments in his wardrobe. “I worked hard on it, it’s not actually an old one but- there’s still a fandom and all because oh *gods*, he was at it for so long! And the reputation, I mean...content for *ages*.”

Their voice was a little bit garbled, presumably from their little tusks. How...charming? Interesting? He didn’t know. Hopefully his own slight slurring wasn’t noticeable.

He nodded as if he knew what they were saying. (‘Content for ages’? *What?*) Tried to act convincing. Had no clue if it was working. “I don’t know why he’d be back,” he managed to

say, letting his careful words slip and become a bit muffled like theirs had gone in that same way rather than his usual sounding slur. “But I’m. Optimistic. Can’t let the...hard work on my look go to waste, right?”

He tried a smile.

Somehow, they chuckled right back at him. The ruse had, miraculously, not been blown.

The runes on the shirt underneath his hoodie were doing a hell of a lot of work not arousing as much suspicion as he thought he’d get, especially in a place like this. Especially, *especially* in a store where copies of his face were plastered all around, albeit almost entirely in makeup or even fancier getup that made him struggle to not think of flashing lights, of blood, of a hand stained red raised high-

“Honestly, though,” they chirped, throwing him off from his half-daze, “you shown that off to anyone? Really, if you just put on the cape, maybe get a crown close enough to the real thing, maybe a nice pin or two...it’d really perfect it! Maybe it’s you the news got all worked up over!”

He coughed and turned it into something of a laugh, rubbing at the back of his neck with the heat of embarrassment. “I don’t think I could, uh, really get a hold of something like that,” Techno said, trying to inject a bit of regret into his voice. “And it was nice meeting you, but-my, uh, my brothers really need me and...”

His brothers did not need him.

In fact, Tommy was dying and stifling laughter at his plight from a few meters behind the two in front of him. Wilbur was nowhere to be seen in his line of sight.

Traitor.

The strangers instantly turned apologetic, though, at his awkward little display. “Oh, no worries, no worries! I mean, we’ve had stuff to do all day but we got sidetracked when we saw this place and oh *gods*, Rose, are we late to meet up with-“

“*Shit*, we are, uh, it was nice to meet you, Basil really liked your cosplay but we have to-“

“Bye!”

“Bye!”

Techno stood there, blinking, long after the two whirlwinds that had approached him left. He turned to look at Tommy, who had found Wilbur in the meantime and...were now *both* cackling at him.

He couldn’t resist childishly sticking his tongue out at them and pointedly turning away, mind thinking over the interaction as he stared down pins with crowns on them, quotes on them, swirling designs edged in gold and silver and bronze.

There were messenger bags with little...Techno-related motifs on them.

There were a *lot* of things related to him. More than he really thought were possible.

A bit comforted by the fact that everyone who saw him seemed to think he was just a very avid cosplayer, even in here, he approached the one person he could see currently behind the main counter, asked a leading question about the merch, and just...watched her go off.

"...How long's it been, again," he asked, "since he's been around? Was it just the, ah...news that made all this stuff come back up?"

"Stuff that ain't Hypixel's dearest competitor doesn't sell well as that shit ever did," the lady behind the counter said gruffly, leaning against it and staring him down with arched eyebrows. "That guy was a cash cow like no other. Maybe two years now or somethin' since that whole thing came crashing down, I guess, but wouldn't you know that? 'Parently he fucked off to that newer Sky subworld and never came back, and even before this, they all kept coming around to a possibility of him comin' back."

He stood there attentively. Ignored the very loud exclamation Wilbur made at seeing something he apparently loved, and Tommy's crow of delight right back at their brother from a few paces away. This was an information-gathering mission, and he would *not* fail it. "Really?" Techno would be polite even if it killed him. "...I didn't ever read much on what happened."

She snorted. "Apparently just farmed a bunch of potatoes there. Go figure something like that happened. Bunch of lunatics in that subworld, I tell you- always coming over here and getting all weirded out at the regular Techno shit we have and, recently, even more weirded out by all the extra stuff that's been pulled out. 'S almost like they forgot he fought for us for years 'n years 'n years. They all act like the world's a game, I tell you. Bunch of fuckin' escapists."

What *didn't* escape him was his instinctual response, or, well. The response he wanted to say and instead only thought, a flare of hot, burning anger rising up inside of him.

Hypocrite, he thought with a deep well of venom, *living in a server like this that exists just for- for making things in real life not applicable. True death through combat. Shut the fuck up.*

But he wasn't that rude. Wasn't that crude.

It made him think, though.

How much of an escape had that Sky subworld been, for him? If he had left with some kind of an announcement, immersed himself in whatever it had over there...

Techno knew, in some part, what he had been escaping from.

But what was the *primary* reason for his flight? What had been the straw to break the camel's back? Had it been the blood, the gore, driving people down without effort and stepping on the backs of everyone he met to get to the top? Was it the business deals that lurked sleazily at the edges of his mind, all the promises that he couldn't pinpoint but still made him sick to

think of, all the- the objectification shown in posters of him, merch of him, perfected beyond belief that crowded his vision from behind the counter that the lady stared at him from?

Techno couldn't get out of there fast enough.

He bought a pin before he left. It was something ornate but oddly understated- a little hairpin that he absentmindedly put on as he left.

It was a stylized crown.

It was when they were milling about in a convenience store that he saw something else, this time sitting innocuously among many of the other items that the three of them were picking over:

A ramen bowl pack. With his face, all makeup-clad and ethereal and slightly sneering, on it.

Pork flavor.

How tasteless could you get, really?

His mouth twisted sharply. When Wilbur saw what he was looking at, the laughter came quick, barking as he bent over and wheezed to himself and pushed at Techno's shoulder. The hybrid flipped him off, rolled his eyes, and put two of the things into the shitty little store basket he was carrying.

And then threw in another one, because Tommy was under the assumption that he had gotten one for him and one for Wilbur instead of two for himself. Techno grudgingly allowed it.

But there had to be a line drawn somewhere, he thought, right? What could he fish out from his memory this time, staring at these bowls and his mind distancing himself from reality more and more with every second? Would anything come?

Late at night, long after they had all eaten and thrown away the bowls and he was sitting, sleepless on his bed and mindlessly letting his thumb pass over the stitches in his cloak, he sat and drifted and remembered, all those shards of memory floating to the surface.

Not the memories he wanted, of course, but the act of remembering was what counted.

He was ready to leave. He was *so* ready to leave.

But leaving also meant cleaning the beginnings of what would be fake blood in post off of him, meant wiping the heavy makeup off and grounding himself to being terrifyingly mortal. Techno stared at himself- at the carefully manicured nails, at the dots of darkness that they had all over them, just hardened enough that nothing on his fingers or hands would smudge anything- and found himself grateful yet again that he could still use the communicator tucked into his bag a few meters away by virtue of its nature.

“Just another few shots,” a producer chirped, and he resigned himself to picking up his head and casting a look around the relatively bare room, reigned in and forced to let his arms be moved by someone into a position that he was sure many would call...dangerous. *Terrifying*, in the right lighting.

For his part, he kept the pose and stared blankly into the camera. Gave a far-off look when they wanted. Ignored the sweat that threatened to bead down the back of his neck under the pointed lights that allowed for sharp contrast and allowed someone to adjust his cloak. Allowed another person to adjust his braid.

“Do you think,” someone called from the edge of his vision, “that we could get some without the cloak? Change up some of the attire, maybe add a pin, some gilded edges either now or in post, see if the scheduled monthly video for next month could be pushed up in production, Crowe, you’ll want to get on that—“

In the absence of being allowed to twitch his fingers under their scrutinizing gazes, he navigated his communicator’s network a bit slower with subvocal commands until he was finally able to get messages with Phil open.

If he would be there for another few hours, cutting into the practice time he had been saving—well, at least he’d message one of his brothers back and forth.

He was so, so tired of this.

He closed his eyes with a sigh.

“Hey—eyes open, over to the side where I’m standing, yes, right over here—“

So tired.

“So, what made a small server kid like you come to a place like Hypixel when you started out? Weren’t you twelve, twelve and a half when you started out?” Their voice was all soft chirping, all velvet questions wrapped around a hard edge and a hidden dagger.

Techno took a sip of his lavender tea, comforted in the fact that he was in one of the chairs that he could sink into without any regrets, if given the chance, and that he had made sure the chair across from him was one of the most uncomfortable in the apartment.

Really, the new place was a godsend like that. The chairs looked almost exactly the same, anyways.

He wondered if the journalist would spin his quiet nature for this publication, for this article. Wondered if they'd mention his eyes for the millionth time this year, or the way that they apparently glimmered in the light, or if they'd mistake his flat tone for anger or dissatisfaction.

If Phil bothered to even glance at any of the Hypixel news publications instead of tending to his home and swearing off media that didn't affect him in his nice, nifty newer private server-Techno would bet he had a count going for how many times they mentioned his eyes. Or the curve of his lips. Or the hundred-yard stare that he fell into when he didn't particularly want to think about their question.

"Well," he said after a moment, "this was really the only place that could handle me." *Perfect.* He gave them a small little smile. Watched their fingers twitch in the way that all of the reporters and journalists fell into, all of them with the same communicators that he had in the pursuit of half-hidden journalism, of lightning-quick recording, of sly glances and hidden smiles.

They raised their eyebrows at him.

He arched one right back. Played the careful dance of unspoken and spoken conversation in the clumsy way he had learned to, observing and then slowly making his own reactions. He took another sip of the lavender tea and resisted the content sigh he wanted to make.

"And what would you mean by that, Techno?"

A pity that he'd never taken a true last name. Only having one name made them all call him something he'd rather they not.

"If you're the best at something like this," Techno murmured, just low enough to give the air of a secret, "there's no place good enough to take you." Let his eyes give the appearance of a smile as they squinted, just a bit. "Hypixel was the only choice I could...the only choice that I could make, I guess. A pity there isn't anything higher up than that. Nobody to properly match me."

"Well," they said, voice tight with an anticipation that interested him, "whispers have been going around about a figure good enough to possibly match you- going around the other big servers and tournaments, claiming their thrones...what's to say this person, this 'Dream'- what's to say you're not next on their list?"

"Simple."

They leaned in. He bared his teeth in a mockery of a grin.

"Techno never dies, right?"

Chapter End Notes

it's my birthday today, 3/21 ! so while this is a scheduled chapter this is also a bday chapter :) i had a lot of fun writing this when i was first writing this segment! and i hope you all like it too!

going to get dinner right after i post this so. have a great night everyone <3 i appreciate everyone who takes the time to read the fic. and the endnotes. somehow i've made friends because of this, uh. little. project. yes. little. yes.

<3333333

xxvii. the thumbprint scar i let define you

Chapter Summary

Techno finally gets to looking at some of his past messages. Blood follows in their steps. Phil, for all that he was a kind brother and guardian, did not look after the inherent safety of his family outside of their home world very well.

(Or: Stranger danger is, in many ways, still applicable in otherwise benign situations, Philza Minecraft.)

Chapter Notes

[chapter title from "i am all that i need / arroyo seco / thumbprint scar" by fleet foxes]

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

There was only so long that Techno could ignore his communicator. There was only so long it could slip his mind while he used its other, more benign functions and gained back that long lost muscle memory of its inner workings. He carefully *didn't* think about all the unread messages, all the little things that crowded at the edge of his mind and howled *see me, see me, I'm a message or an email or something that you want to open up, come look at me*, and silenced the alerts whenever they poked through. He carefully only messaged Phil, Tommy, or Wilbur (if he messaged anyone at all). Carefully didn't go too far up in the logs and end up accidentally letting the information of his time away from them bleed into his head.

It had been over a year, two, maybe even three or more years in his mind since his original communicator had broken, given how the time had warped there, since he had last properly looked at all the messages, given how the seasons stayed the same for so long before they finally broke, too.

He didn't want to think about how it had only been a few months of radio silence on their ends, on the ends of his brothers who went about their lives as normal, and possibly years or more on his.

Hah.

(That was time, though. It was the insidious way in which it kept its maw poised over him before it snapped, communicator broken, and took him into its fold. He had been lost there for so long, had forgotten so much, and he didn't even know the way in which he had forgotten, or how quick it was.

How long had he still been able to remember their faces? Their smiles? Their voices?

...He didn't know.

He didn't even know.)

For the rest of the people that had him as a contact, it was much the same. They messaged and messaged and they wondered why he wasn't responding as quick as he apparently used to, before the last messages ended up being a few weeks before he was found in most cases.

As of late, more messages had popped up. He wondered how many were just repeated messages and how many were because of the rumors that he was back on this server. How many were those he had been contracted under before. How many were Quartz, Sinea, trying to get back at him even though he- even though he-

...Even though he had done something to get them off of his back. Enough that there were casual mentions as to him genuinely leaving the main server instead of going MIA.

They were messaging him more often, anyways, trying to bypass his notification silence with everything they could. Techno tried his hardest to keep them away.

But, well. There was only so long that the constant hum of messages and notifications at the back of his mind would read as *comforting* instead of weighted with a need to drive him insane, a buzzing at the back of his mind due to the sheer amount of unread content taking up space in storage.

(Tommy had thousands of unread messages and emails. At least that didn't weigh on his brother's mind, or whatever. Geez.)

More memories had been coming back ever since he had gotten his communicator, side-by-side with his body doing things he didn't entirely comprehend. Side-by-side with wandering, with talking to people that might have known him. Side-by-side with hearing, faintly, about the newest bloodbath of the day and watching as Wilbur and Tommy would switch the television in the corner of his gaze away from televised and meaningless-but-oh-so-meaningful murder when they noticed him.

He couldn't keep running from the fear of losing his tentative control and letting them take over.

He *wouldn't* keep running.

Techno let himself pour a mug of lavender tea with careful precision out in the kitchen, a song and dance that relaxed him in that evening atmosphere. Put the rest in a thermos to refill his mug with later. Almost robotically, he went through the motions, smiled faintly at his brothers as they started up a movie, and denied wanting to watch with them with a wave of his hand and an apologetic look.

(It looked like an interesting movie, but. Uh. He had more important things to do.)

He sat at the edge of his bed, mug and thermos resting on the bedside table, and let his fingers dance with finely controlled movements in his lap, curling into each other when they weren't being used. Techno flew through the broader checks of his communicator and paused when he found himself having to choose- emails, or shorter, more private messages from contacts?

Techno paused. Went into the messages as a test, threw up a filter option, and let the statistics chirp back at him. Deleted everything that wasn't from someone he had in his contacts, no matter how important they could be.

They didn't matter, he was sure of it. They couldn't matter, if he had no clue who they were and his purpose was just for information.

(How important was a message from a nobody? What effect would it have on the him of the now compared to the him of a different age?)

He did the same for the emails to the extent that he could. Culled any from those who hadn't messaged him since before he had arrived here in Hypixel, gone back to his apartment.

The numbers left were still anxiety-inducing.

You have to take the plunge, one part of him said.

Find the context, another part murmured, sounding suspiciously like Phil. *The context. The context. It's vital.*

It's now or never.

He opened up the message section. Took a deep breath from where he sat. Took a deep sip of the mug and tried to not feel like everything was, in some way, hopeless, and started his search.

The messages from Quartz, from Sinea and its other subsidiaries were, oddly, easier to glance at, go back a bit, and then delete. The messages from their representatives were cool and calm, and he let his mind skim through them almost like a palate cleanser. He breathed in and let it all sink in- reminders for contracts that hit the wrong kind of note, as if he had left them but they wanted to drag him back in, reminders for content that he had promised the people at large and never entirely followed up on, the list went on and on and on.

Notes like *Heard you're back, looking forward to working with you again :)* and *Quartz Entertainment would like to begin a new, revised contract with you after the obvious misunderstandings of your resignation* and *Never thought you'd show your face around here* clogged his head, all seemingly predatory but not confusing, not...not entirely, with the feeling he got from them.

It left a strange taste in his mouth. A palate cleanser, for sure, but what kind was it?

Memories floated by from them, from every word that so much as imagined that it could tell him a story. A shock here, a blink there when a sentence popped out at him more than he expected.

A new winstreak for the Sky Wars incoming, perhaps, one message mentioned before he deleted it from the communicator, snorting softly as he thought vaguely about grueling hours fighting person after person, soaking himself in blood with the only thoughts swirling in his mind being about what would happen the next day.

One company tried to leverage a campaign he didn't remember. Something that didn't quite click. Techno rubbed at his eyes and tried to think of them, only to let his mind drift onto other messages, other ideas. *Didn't dissolving the contract free me of-* and it was all gone from his head.

The companies, the contacts, the names that meant nothing to him at face value and that he could tell would only cause misery further on, all blurred together. It was so easy, so fucking *easy* to separate them from the rest of the crowd, from the random people who had messaged him once upon a time and the other various tiers within.

Companies. Logos. Names that had a little signifier next to them that the past Techno had done- and wasn't it telling that it was a little red X next to their names, next to everyone from Sinea, from everyone under them, anyone in the industry he had been in? *Do not contact. Do not interact.*

All he did was read their latest messages, delete them from his communicator and from his immediate thoughts, and move on.

As the minutes passed, Techno started to taste a far away life that felt almost like a foreign film. Once, he had been a child. Once, he had been that little piglin hybrid who hadn't completely caught onto language and mostly responded in grunts and the harsh syllables of his non-human side's tongue, made sure he was understood in actions if he wasn't in words. Remembered his smaller form in some of his first games on the Hypixel server, brought along by Phil and stuck with the rest of the beginners before he decimated them all.

They hadn't come with the experience he had, anyways.

And of course his mind spun various ways, going off track even as he crossed another group of messages off his list, looked at the most recent text displayed from some and dismissing them all- he drifted and his mind pulled at anything it thought was interesting and of *course* it thought the him that first came here, even fuzzier than more recent memories, was a fascinating little artifact.

Look through the murk. See the clarity beneath it and breathe it all in.

Techno took a long sip of lavender tea.

This *had* been what he was hoping for, wasn't it? This was the search for context he wanted, the past traces of meetings and smiles and what was around a fight just as much as he needed to know what went on in the heat of battle.

The aftermath of battle.

It wasn't like he could strictly choose what he remembered.

Techno set the mug down and truly let himself fade out, let the memories come as slow or fast as they wanted to, and drowned himself in the current that came through.

...Of course the blood came first, sharks in the water that those memories were.

The sword in the chest wasn't the right size.

The hybrid examined it, the corners of his lips turning downwards as he rummaged through the chests on the small island he had been transported to, mind racing. The armor wasn't quite the right size, just standardized enough that it'd fit but it'd be loose. He definitely seemed to be one of the smallest of the bunch, from what he had seen in the easy-going waiting room full of laughter and 'no hard feelings' among the taller 'teenagers' (or at least that was what Phil had called them), but...even this smaller armor wasn't quite right.

Techno would have to grin and bear it. It was of a high quality, anyways, and he figured that whoever made it had to just try and make sure it'd be good for the largest amount of people. At some point, you just had to sacrifice the perfect fit for the broadest fit.

It was fine. It was *fine*. Tighten some straps, make sure it's a bit snug, and it'd be good.

The *sword*, though- the sword was far too large to hold in one hand and swing properly, especially with the weight of the chestpiece and footwear he had found.

...It'd have to be two-handed, he supposed, even if from what he had seen these people weren't fond of such a style.

The ends justified the means, though, and the time was ticking down. He had people to go and defeat before *they* defeated him on the sky-islands.

Perhaps he should have expected the gore.

Perhaps, he thought, staring down at the body beneath him, he *should* have remembered that people, in fact, did have blood and organs inside of them. He stared at the person's twitching body, at their snarling and half-screams and crying, and thought of the way that the zombies in Phil's world crumbled to dust once they took enough damage, the way that skeletons had a core that you had to break through the bones to and smash.

How spiders had very different, much smellier guts than humans did.

Than piglins did, either, come to think of it.

He had killed before. (In desperation, in panic, in a savage kind of hope that he'd live to see another day.) He had cut through things before. (To release himself, in paranoia, in fear that sunk right down into his bones and rattled them until he could scream.)

He stared down the person, easily a foot and a half taller than him if they were standing- that he could see- and looked around him.

Sometimes, he thought, he was pretty sure that these were televised. Shown to the masses. He had seen it on screens walking through the city, right?

But never a scene like *this*. There were never people new to it shown. Never a group of complete newbies among hundreds of groups like them. It was a daily round of people good at combat that got the attention of the crowd, wasn't it? Phil had taken him to this place to see if he would like it but he hadn't been interested on what was playing on the screens.

But. That wasn't what mattered.

What mattered was that *he* had been the cause of this person bleeding out. The cause of them staring and slurring out curses at him. The very real person that was going to be dead after this-

No. Not dead. 'Respawning' was a thing that existed, even if he had been dubious at Phil's stilted explanation of *admin-world-fabric-twist* a few turns of the moon ago.

The 'teenager' spasmed beneath him.

He was merciful. He let the blade fall on their neck after another moment.

Techno resisted the urge to throw up.

This wasn't fighting for survival. He was better than them, just like how he had been able to match the adult piglins.

This? This was just bringing striders to the slaughter.

...He had more people to go hurt. To go kill or sink a blade into or throw off the stage like he had seen someone else fall minutes ago, to sink into the void and presumably be whole again once the round had been completed.

Techno wondered if the stage would be cleaned and reused. Wondered if the carnage that he walked though, sword heavy in his hands as he launched himself into another battle, would be cleaned up like nothing ever happened.

If he *focused*, he could see dark stains on the wood and stone and dirt in various places of the arena.

He steadfastly ignored it.

He had to ignore it.

(He couldn't ignore it.)

At least Phil seemed. Proud.

"Hey, Tech," Phil said to him once he was out, when there was nothing from the experience marked on him except for an ache deep in his body, blood meticulously washed off of his hands until they ran raw, some hair gone from someone's blade going through the ends, and a cut wrapped on his shoulder (how it ached, but Phil would worry, he was so weird about wounds and scarring, especially on Techno's body, he couldn't show him), "how was it? Do any good before someone gotcha?"

He looked up at Phil and let his tongue run over his teeth, let himself ponder the question as his hands flexed, as he looked around in the lobby for the people coming and going from low-tier matches and let the atmosphere settle.

Some groups were friends all laughing together. Others were parents and children, or single people milling about and waiting for something in the grand lobby. Sometimes, an adult would bring groups of teens in and out, all of them looking like something rode on their appearances there, all tied together by similar clothing.

It was all...*informal*. All so- not *quaint*, because he hadn't seen this many people *ever*, really, back on Phil's server or in the Nether or anywhere- but it left him thoughtful.

Thoughtful of the way that, back in the smaller lobby's waiting room before they were all transported out one way or another, half of the people in the room wouldn't meet his eyes. How the other half congratulated him a bit too loudly before they ribbed on the people they knew in the room who had fallen to a '*little piglin hybrid*'.

It felt dishonest. It felt like a bit of...*something* had curdled in his mouth.

How was it, Phil had asked him. Assumed that someone had, in the end, beaten him.

"It was...*something*," he finally said, choosing his words carefully, the pronunciation a bit slurred, a bit stilted just as it had been since Phil had found him, started teaching him the most universal language of the servers. He let himself take Phil's hand, a comfort that he wouldn't deny himself in such a loud server, a place that overtook all of his senses and then some, and squeezed it with mild anxiety. "I'm not sure that I liked it," he admitted with a frown.

"I mean, there's plenty of other things for you to try- maybe duels, I know you like fighting, really, is it the heights-"

"I like *fighting*," he said in the middle of his speech, interrupting Phil in a rare show of...of asserting himself when he had been shown to prefer listening. "I...I like it." His mouth twisted, just a bit. "But...I don't like killing. People."

"Oh," Phil said. "Oh."

"Oh," Techno echoed, letting himself rock back on his heels. He looked away. "I *like* fighting," he repeated, unable to get himself to say what he wanted just right. It all blended together yet again and made him ball up his free hand into a fist, face dark and stormy and frustrated. "I just. The *people*," he said helplessly. "The people."

Perhaps, if he had time, he could formulate something that flowed a little better. Could tell Phil how it wasn't just the blood and the guts and the twitching but also the way that those he had looked at reacted. How the person he had finished off had such a fire of anger and fear in their eyes, especially when he gazed at them after the match was over.

How much had it hurt, for them?

And how much delight had another person gotten when they managed to slice his shoulder just so, the wound wrapped gently in a bandage that he could still feel, after the fact?

A wound that would scar because he hadn't respawned, apparently, because he had never seen scars from his blade on those he had killed?

"...Maybe that's enough of this part of the city for the day," Phil murmured. "We can get Wil from his music lessons, get some ice cream. Head back home."

That sounded like a plan.

Yes, that sounded like a *very* good plan.

He followed the instructions of the person who wrapped the wound on his arm. Snuck into the medkit Phil kept at their small home in the little server they went back to. He steadfastly changed out the bandages, disinfected the wound that night and all the nights after and kept himself from hissing at the way it stung.

It wasn't something he wanted to bother Phil with. Not at all.

Blood, Techno thought, leaning back from where he sat on his bed until he was well and truly laying down with his head *thunking* against the headboard. *Blood and gore and- and mercy killings*. And Phil, eyes warm and kind and good, assuming that he had fallen with grace.

He breathed in. Breathed out.

The memories kept coming.

Techno let himself drift to the balcony. Let himself sip at his sparkling juice, pretending as if it were champagne, and let his ears twitch to hear the sounds of the banquet behind him.

For *rising stars* in the Hypixel scene, apparently. Phil had heard of it, had talked him through what it meant when Techno got the message ping by the pond they had, and had gently urged him into going when he gave his older brother the thought that he wasn't keen on it because he was, simply, an *introvert*.

Go make some friends, Phil had said kindly. *Go be a pogchampion and all that, mate*.

The smile, full of gentle pride at his younger brother's accomplishments, had been what made him fold in the end. Phil was all soft sunshine and encouraging words and of *course* Techno had to go, especially because Techno had implied it was something fancy but small, using the special term 'friends'. Why wouldn't he?

However, that didn't change the fact that he wasn't in the mood to talk with people, and he was sure that his grumpy look would enforce it.

But Phil had given him words of *praise*, had made sure he was dressed in the nicest clothes he could get and then tailored them as best as he could to him, and so Techno had gone with nicely fitting clothes, ones that weren't for fighting but breathed nicely all the same, and strolled as the young teen he was into a world of older teens and adults and glasses of alcohol.

And now he was out here. Because it was too fucking *loud*.

Language, Phil would say- but it was *his* mind. And he didn't particularly care about policing it.

If he just thought hard enough, he could piece together proper words to explain what was going on. He could puzzle through it all and find the correct little things to unlock what he really meant to say, to speak out loud in front of others, in front of his two brothers- but occasionally, that was too much.

Often, that was too much to ask of him.

He was simple. If he wanted to, he could find the words in his first tongue, but the second- well, it was impossible, really, given pressure. Given no time.

And what he was looking to say didn't have a proper equivalent in the language he thought in.

He didn't like having to go about and talk among people. Between groups. Making trade routes- no, perhaps *connections* was the better word. Building connections through words and trying to make sure they'd be strong.

“Not a fan of networking, huh?”

Networking, that was it- wait.

Wait, that had been a *person* who said that.

He turned to see a smartly dressed person walk up to him, teeth gleaming as they grinned down at him and took a place right beside Techno. They sipped at a glass- *real* champagne, he noted- and looked back out at the city they could see spread out in front of them.

“I’m not much of a fan of it, either,” they mused, “but they do gather some success, I suppose- just as eliminating everything creates a path to victory. Am I right, Techno?”

He looked over at them. They knew his name. He squinted his eyes. They winked.

“I think,” they said, “that you’d be *very* interested in what I have to say. You’re a rising star, after all, that’s why you’re here- and I don’t know what everyone’s thinking in *not* approaching you. You’ve been quite brilliant.” A pause. “Probably even better than the current champions, given enough time.”

Techno stayed silent.

“How about I offer you a deal?”

He stared at them. Snorted softly and glanced away.

“Hey, hey, maybe that was a bit too strong- do you have your guardian here, or anything, if that’d make you more comfortable...? Or maybe you just want my name? I mean, I’m Rei, if you’d like that. I’m from Quartz Entertainment.”

Maybe if he ignored them enough, they’d go away.

Instead, they stood in silence with him for a time. They didn’t challenge him, didn’t make him instinctively snarl and bristle with a piglin’s aggression and instinct. Instead, they stood there. Breathed. Sipped at their glass.

...Maybe he could tolerate them.

“No deal,” he muttered.

“...No deal, then.” They tilted their head in the corner of his view. He could see a hint of what appeared to be a genuine smile. “A potential association, then?”

“...”

He left that night with an odd glide to his step and the memory of Rei, the Quartz Entertainment person that wouldn’t quite leave his mind.

A potential association, then.

...Associations didn't have to be run by one's guardian, right?

...Huh.

Techno wasn't the fastest at deleting the most recent messages from the ever-open list, at putting them as read and shoving them to the back of his attention span and purging the rest of what the contact had in some cases. Some things cause memories to fly by, and it made him go through the actual data at what he felt was genuinely a snail's pace. Some names caused jolts of sheer panic, knowledge without all the memories behind them snapping into existence- some of these people, he knew, were admins.

Hypixel admins. The backbone of the server, the people that kept it running, those that held all of the power in their group but were set in a rigid structure as to keep themselves in line.

Some of them had reached out. Recently.

Some already knew he was there- after all, hiding things from admins, especially on public places like Hypixel, Techno knew even from common sense was impossible even if he didn't entirely know why, why, *why*. They knew the data. They could just check who came in and out, and his presence, for some reason, was probably tagged with some importance.

And Phil and his brothers had alerted them about his arrival beforehand.

So it wasn't like that flagging was devastatingly important, or anything.

It didn't matter.

In the end, though, none of the admins really mattered to him, right? He didn't want what they had to offer, what they wanted to talk about, even though he imagined they were generally separated from the bulk of capitalism and commercialization. He wanted to get the whole of himself that he had kept there and leave,, and admins didn't factor into it.

Other people- well, those he could get to that night as he went through the contacts list- left him with more...interesting memories. Curious reactions.

At least the bulk of the worst ones were over with, able to be sorted out and dealt with as he weathered the deluge of what they brought him.

These other people-

“Bet I can trick you,” the person behind him crowed, and he turned his head just enough to catch a shock of blue hair, of fingers that went electric blue at their tips and glittering skin. “Come on, Techno, you’re just *cheating* at this point!”

“Not cheating,” Techno called back, a smile playing on his lips as he slowed to a stop at the end of the course. “You gave me pearls. Why wouldn’t I use them? And why would you create a place with checkpoints to abuse and decorations on the edges that are easy enough to jump across?”

“You’re supposed to- to play *fair*,” they gasped, slowing beside him and putting their hands on their knees, bending over to breathe.

“Skeppy.”

“Techno.”

“If you wish to be even half as good as me-“

“Oh, not this again-“

“Train for another thousand years.”

“*I swear*; I’ll get you, you dirty cheater, I can’t believe you, *gods*...”

In the end, they were both laughing.

“Really, that win streak of yours- it’s impressive, man.”

Techno hummed and leaned forwards, letting his elbows rest on his legs as he stared out at the curious sight before him- a whole selection of plants, a botanical garden floating midair, the fabric of reality twisted *just so* to let them fit. “It’s nothin’.”

“No, I’m not kidding- Techno, the last person to have a win streak like that was *years* ago, and they only got to about three hundred. Over two years. You’re at, what, four hundred and seven- in eight months.”

“Simon,” he said dryly, “you just grind it out. It’s not hard.”

“But- I-“

The man next to him, in the other chair, groaned and shook his head. Techno gave another flat hum.

“Techno,” Simon eventually said, “you’re. Really something. All of us are pretty shocked- it’s meant to get a little harder on you, you know, the more you succeed without being taken

down. A little chip each time.” A pause. “Maybe I shouldn’t tell you, uh, the exact details. Maybe Quartz should have made your admin contact, you know, one of the veterans. But. It’s not like they expected you’d get this big.”

“Trust me,” Techno murmured, “I’d go crazy with anyone else. Gods, could you imagine me two or three years ago when I was first signed on, paired with one of—”

“Yeah, yeah, I get it.” A snort. “I’m glad I’m paired with you, too, for what it’s worth, even if you give me a hell of a lot of trouble. At least I’m in charge of less people as a result.”

“Very funny, Simon.”

“Thank you.”

The plants kept floating. Spinning. Flickering.

“Onto business, I suppose,” Techno muttered. “No use still sitting around.”

“... Yeah.”

Simon seemed- sad.

He wondered why.

“Have you...done any pieces for other people at all, Teach?”

Techno examined the piece he held in his hands as he talked- a test piece of fabric, oh-so similar to the cloak that Phil had lovingly gifted him for his birthday- and sighed. The material was just something he had bought a yard of at the first fabric store he could find, something that would match the shade of the cloak but be cheap enough to practice on freely, but...hm.

He had a masterpiece to create, and he was only really focused on the wisp of conversation he was trying to start up.

“Not...” He hummed and tried to figure out exactly what he wanted to say. It was a long moment before he continued- Teach’s mouth had been open to respond, but... “Not. Wording bad. Give me a second.”

“Of course,” his teacher murmured. The smile on their face stayed steady. Eternal.

Rain pounded against the windows, flying at an angle that was just loud enough and just soft enough to be comforting. He considered what he held in his hands and let himself stitch again with the red thread he planned to put on the final cloak, started the most basic protection chain and absentmindedly let it continue on.

It was more for the appearance than the actual workability, anyways. He could just cut this strip off when it was finished and practice the real thing he aimed for on another line of fabric, shortened as it would be.

But he let himself continue, let himself ponder over what he had really meant to ask.

“Have,” he started again, careful that his words would be properly pronounced, “you ever... enchanted a piece for someone you know? Personally? A family member. A friend.”

The thought had been on his mind, lately, swirling round and round without end. He had just *felt* Phil’s exhaustion through their latest call, the visual feeds just crisp enough to show the way he tried to silently yawn while he stress baked some cookies.

Come to think of it, Techno hadn’t been home in a while.

Not since his birthday.

Maybe he should go back, actually, and talk with Phil a bit more in-depth about how he could help out more now that Wilbur was out of the house more just like he was, touring various small servers and friend groups and finding his place in the world. Tommy hadn’t been that fond of all of his chores, leaving the brunt to Phil- as Tommy wasn’t that fond of them in the first place, really- but... Techno wondered if something would help. Perhaps if he could find more excuses and loopholes in contracts, dip out for longer periods of time when he could-

“I’ve made some things for people I care about,” Teach eventually cut off his thoughts with a mild tone, sounding as if they were considering their words with the same care Techno had, pausing their work on what seemed to be a blanket with an idle hum. “I...I do make sure to try and either work in a concealing chain along it or try and make sure it’s the other half of what I intend to do with it. If you don’t...” They waved a hand. “Could fuck you over. Clients, you don’t have to worry about. Friends...family...they’d wonder where you got it from. The questions wouldn’t be nice.”

“Do you know from, from...”

“Experience? No.” After a long moment, they begun stitching again, just a little bit more pointedly than they had been working before. The rain whipped against the windows stronger, the wind undoubtedly howling outside but not making too much of a difference for sound. “But I’ve heard stories, Techno.”

“...I don’t have any concealment runes worked into what I want to do with...my piece.”

“You?” A snort. “You don’t have to, Techno. You’re famous enough that it’s surprising you *don’t* have a thread-enchanted piece, anyways. Rich enough, well known enough...if *you’re* the one who’ll wear it- you’re fine.”

Something strange lingered in the air. Something that Techno didn’t quite *like*.

I’m not that rich, he didn’t say. *I’m tied up in so much more than you think I am*, he didn’t voice.

He continued in silence and let the rain back his work. Teach worked comfortably in that silence alongside him.

I wonder if they'd ever let me have a thread enchanted piece without me sneaking behind their backs and getting one without their knowledge, he thought mildly. Pushed down the dread.

Wonder if they'll have any questions for me when this cloak is finished.

He breathed in. Breathed out shakily, dangerously, wavering in his steadiness.

“Bozo.”

“Nerd.”

That was all it boiled down to, in the end, wasn’t it?

They shook on it. Techno bared his teeth, let his tusks gleam, and Squid let his eyes shine with reciprocated animosity.

No more words had to be spoken.

First to the finish line gets it all.

They had business to complete, after all, and those potatoes wouldn’t farm themselves.

Chapter End Notes

thank yall for the birthday wishes. i'll try to respond to comments when not tired.

again, this is Very Meandering, but the next few chapters should be pretty good, in my unwarranted opinion. also a small reminder that most things were decided for this months ago.

have a lovely night!!! love yall! :)

xxviii. these memories ache with the weight of tomorrow

Chapter Summary

Line your ducks in a row. Make sure you take care of every single one. Techno breathes.

(Or: The unnatural calm before the storm.)

Chapter Notes

[chapter title from "shadowbringers" in the soundtrack for final fantasy xiv's shadowbringers.]

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

He couldn't get through every single contact of his, every single email and message and mistake of his, overnight.

He'd work on it. It was fine.

The gates had been opened, after all, and Techno was still dealing with the fallout of examining so many things at once, memories rattling around his head and bouncing against so many other bits that he couldn't focus on to even parse through. Even still, not everything he remembered was even *attached* to what he had opened. Teach's hadn't been touched, still unread, but their presence loomed over him as if it was an omen. A few other whispers in his mind were attached to other people that he hadn't checked yet, or his brothers, or, or, or. Some he couldn't even connect with a specific person in his mind.

Techno was absolutely, amazingly, *one hundred percent fine* if one didn't open their eyes and see the very blatant spiral he had slowly been drawn into. He was *perfectly fine* and *good* if not for the way that he got no sleep in the days after his first deep search of his communicator, the way that he walked around like a zombie in the apartment, passed out on the couch and didn't get up except to move back to his bed.

Lavender tea would fix it.

Lavender tea didn't fix it.

What could he even say to his brothers about the way he was coming apart at the seams, a slow desynthesis into his base essentials? '*I'm sorry, but I'm remembering a lot right now*

and interaction is hard'? Sorry, but he could barely even get out four word statements to them, barely present in conversation as he was.

Techno...went through the motions.

He sat down and stitched things he couldn't entirely comprehend when he couldn't sleep, slowly continuing to turn over every stone that was an unread message as he did so. He sifted through memories with his hands busied, his mind plucking out strands of reality and trying to fit them into the tapestry of what he could comprehend, and came out the other side with a mess of stitching and a bloodied couple of fingers from the needle pricking them so many times.

At least it was a scrap piece of fabric.

He practiced flowing, tightly controlled movements in the training room. Ran on the treadmill. Lifted weights that he could barely make sense of and let his muscle memory do the work for him. If he surfaced in-between it all, he sometimes thought that he could see Tommy at the edge of his vision, a frown on his face, or Wilbur's favorite stupid mustard yellow sweater that got bathed in the hues of the outside world far too often to be a true mustard yellow lurking by the door.

When he looked again, they weren't there.

One foot in front of the other.

There was a scar, he realized one evening, showering his hair and letting himself float between half-remembered scenes and vague thoughts as he finally, *properly* cleaned himself for the first time in days in the most cognizant moment he had been allowed by his mind so far, that was a *vicious* little thing.

It was at the back of his knee. Behind his knee? It was hard to tell. The words didn't come easily when he was talking to people, much less when he was trying to rationalize something alone to himself. He could feel it just barely when he actively searched for it but sometimes it ached *just* right to unsteady him.

It had been a lucky hit, if he...*remembered* correctly, although he had a feeling that he could explain so many of the scars on his body away as lucky hits. The blade had been a last ditch effort to down him, one versus twenty, and he had laughed high and mighty and spun away from it all. Had barely even staggered.

Another scar was small. Right on his hand, right where his thumb met the back of his hand. It didn't hurt, he could barely feel it even when the rest of his scars moaned at him, but he could turn his hand in the air and it'd catch the light just enough for his gaze to focus on it every time.

He couldn't stop thinking through the haze of messages and memories, to some effect, about what made his body what it was.

Techno couldn't look away from the television in the dead of the night when it autoplayed another Hypixel event after a reality television show finished up, another little bloodbath where Techno could let the reality of it play on top of each other. His breath caught in his throat but he couldn't look away without anyone else there, couldn't help but get caught up in memories that chased each other and bit at his psyche until he was twitching from the panic of it all.

Those fights had made him what he was. He had been forged in fire and the blood of one half of what made him a hybrid and he had come out all the stronger for it, fighting people over twice his size in a realm of red stone and cutthroat tactics. He had emerged into a realm where fighting was for sport but no less bloody because of it, had cut his teeth on the worst and come back for more as a *child*.

Had come back to climb on top of the pile of bodies and had crowed of his victory- only to be trapped in a cycle by a newer, stranger, hungrier predator.

Quartz had been- not quite subtle, in retrospect, but they clearly knew how to deal with people like him. They had gently worked past his initial wariness as a tween into a young teen and had cultivated him expertly enough to make him feel sick later, their sweet words wrapped around him until he could finally figure out exactly what they meant and find what they had trapped him into.

Of course companies manipulated younger teenagers into contracts. Flexible laws and bountiful loopholes, especially cross-server, allowed for so much exploitation, as it turned out. Especially when going from a backwater no-name small server into the belly of a whole different beast, racking up scars along the way.

But- but- he couldn't *remember* it all. He remembered the *results* of it. Remembered fashion shoots and other sponsorships arranged through them and the fact that, when he got popular enough, he was shuffled off to at least the bare minimum social engagements that he could be in- which was *far* too many by his standards. They paraded him around and his face was everywhere and his name was on the lips of so many that now, when he returned to pick up the pieces of what he once was, he found himself labeled a cosplayer by those that had apparently followed his career since the start.

He didn't remember the exact signings of any contracts. Didn't remember the bulk of how they shaped him up, but there was no mistake in the way his hands shook trying to bring back those memories. There was no mistake in the way that, on one day when his scars ached the most, a callback to a few days at Phil's when he could barely do anything, he thought first of Quartz. Of Hypixel's bloodbaths and fighting and the way that his days were full of activity.

It was so, so hard, trying to get all of those shards of that other self back. It left him feeling-strange.

How alien.

How *odd*.

He could remember, in-between spare glasses of wine when neither Wilbur or Tommy were awake and before his body swept him away and took his control away with it, could remember spare comments that left him in dire need of more alcohol, conversations that a younger him hadn't entirely comprehended and the current him couldn't entirely parse but that left a sour enough taste for him to feel sick at remembering them.

Behind-the-door conversations that he had ignored at the time, but had stuck in his head, lurking, waiting, whispering.

We'll need to market him well, for the server to get sold on a hybrid. Especially a piglin hybrid- you know the hysteria that can cause from some audiences.

Hybrids are rare enough, yeah. Piglin- I mean, those don't tend to last long, do they, in just regular life?

Too feral. Too violent.

Be sure to get the behavior analyst in here soon, now that you mention it. No losses- passive outside of games now, but maybe later...

Didn't you set up a meeting with him for...a minute before now?

Ah, shit- Is he outside, or something-

Techno downed a glass of wine. Poured himself another.

Ignored the looks that his brothers gave him as he sat at the island for breakfast, fractionally aware of his surroundings as he stirred a mug of lavender tea and tried to stay awake enough to eat.

What image do we want to put off? Violent like all the notions of him would be as he gets older?

No. No, we don't want to do that, but...look, that tilt of the chin, the look he gave that person- the look he's giving us...grow up a bit and with the right amount of makeup you'd think it's almost ethereal, wouldn't you? The ears aren't as strange as some of the other hybrids out there...almost like what I'd think an elf's would look like if they were real-

But the tusks-

Just put it in the right light, okay? You can still lean into the blood, can still lean into his performance out there. But if you spin things just so...

There had been something in the past that had driven Techno on his techniques, something that pushed him just far enough to remember days of training outside of everything else that was going on, training first in the world that he and Phil and Wilbur resided in with a handful of others, far away, training until the sun set and he could fight monsters for more knowledge, training that transformed even further when he started spending days at Hypixel, days not always spent at home.

Training that turned endless once he started training completely at Hypixel and only came back home for special occasions.

Techno started to go out of the apartment, again, but he was a person on a mission. Or, rather- his past self, the ghost of it, was on a mission. He sniffed down old haunts, retraced steps that his body was starting to become more accustomed to bringing him to, and went too fast for Wilbur or Tommy to follow him. He lost himself among the crowds and kept the hoodie he put on tight, smiled faintly and nodded at whoever complimented him on his...*cosplaying*.

The hype hadn't died down, not for him. It seemed as if an admin of some sort had admitted his presence, but- it didn't matter, did it, not when people just thought he was very dedicated in his efforts and not actually the real Techno?

After all, the *real* Techno wouldn't appear to be only half-there. The real Techno wouldn't mumble to himself or excuse himself entirely from conversations once they got to be too long, the real Techno sat them out no matter how horrible they were and smiled faintly at whoever had been talking to him when he left.

The real Techno would probably put more effort into hiding who he was. Would probably cover up scars with makeup. Would probably dye his hair or cut it even though he had been known for his hair that had steadily increased in length over the years.

Techno- maybe not the 'real' one, but the one that rested within his body now- kept retracing those steps. He found a place that shocked into him a memory of training in a gym when he was a tween, a teacher that he quickly outgrew despite their years of experience and made him go back to Phil's amused training efforts. He breathed in and closed his eyes and opened them, again and again and again, to find himself in completely different locations.

He remembered killing as fast as he could. As *painless* as he could, really, even though there was always some amount of pain on the loser's part. Techno remembered people not being able to meet his eyes, or a new competitor in a duel once he had gotten enough of a reputation that he could properly take part in them *shake* when they were led out to face him.

He remembered the way blood smelled, all sharp and tangy and enraging. The way it tasted, in the odd chance that the blood went into a slightly open mouth. He had tasted blood before, from animals that were caught, both from his home and from the odd fine dining- waste not and want not in various proportions. He'd spin around in battle one day and gain another scar before finding himself partaking in an entirely different battle hours later, one of words that he had to be careful to pronounce properly and of coded phrases that he muddled through like his life depended on it.

Remembered various offers. Various deals. Various twists of the contract.

Something was terribly, *terribly* wrong with Techno, and despite their best efforts, none of his brothers were able to pry the exact reasoning out of him. They knew, to some extent, that he was remembering things. They knew, to some extent, that he was trying to do things that he had done before, trying to go through moves slowly and watch shows and talk with them and revisit places that he had either shown them or that they had never known he went to.

They knew, to some extent, how much he loathed fighting. How unsettled he grew at some of the televised Hypixel programs. They stayed away from them, sure, but what was stopping him from hopping into and out of the fire, attempting to regain memories in a not at all safe way? What was stopping him from just shocking himself into it, *especially* with his communicator resting inside his back now?

We hope this finds you well, one of the first emails he checked said, all crisp and clean and tagged with a high priority. *Quartz Entertainment has recently noted a subclause of your contract that states that all assets with a track record of six years or more come back for a meeting and the bi-annual Star Banquet-*

He deleted it.

If he knew something for sure, even if the details were fuzzy, it was that when he had gone to the Sky subworld, he had made sure to check every little box and jump every little hoop ten times over so that he wasn't- bound to anything. He knew at least that. He knew the way that the world would try to trick him, and the label of 'Quartz Entertainment' stamped onto it would do nothing to *endear* him to their fucking *tricks*-

He tried to ignore the messages and emails that Sinea or Quartz sent, if at all possible. From anyone connected to them, although it was hard to tell, for the most part.

But what was stopping him from remembering little aspects about them? What was stopping him from remembering the way he'd be making awkward but polite small talk to someone before another person in contract with Quartz chased them away and brought him back into the fold of people they '*thought were more appropriate to talk to*' more?

To what extent would things- to what extent had he been *policed*?

Enough that he tried to delete any of their messages before he saw them properly, he supposed.

Enough for him to try and chase those memories away with memories of fighting, of all things.

And then his brothers almost panicked when he tried to physically track those traces of remembrance down. *Go figure.*

Why had he fought?

Why had he gone to this place to fight, and ended up getting himself immersed in a culture that he couldn't stand but at the same time a culture that quietly helped him on its lower levels? The people at that hole in the wall restaurant had been kind. Once upon a time, he had probably known the intricacies of their stories, of their lives, had known their names.

Once upon a time, the people that he had met had told them all these things about themselves. Perhaps he once knew a few of Skeppy's fears. Perhaps he had met the rest of the Hypixel admins and puzzled out exactly why Simon was the one he knew well enough to have a name put to him.

Once upon a time he had been *some* measure of happy here, before or after Teach had found him and started grilling him in the form of enchantment he ended up figuring out how to use before forgetting it all. His cloak wasn't *proper* without the enchantments that he himself had placed on it. Some of his clothes wouldn't feel as comfortable without minor little stitches in them, not meant for protection but for calm.

He was wearing a lot of those shirts of hiding or protection- or, well, calm, calm, *calm* was the most important- nowadays.

Techno was scrubbing his hands harder in the sink, nowadays, a layer of red staining them in his vision too often for him to decipher the reality of it all. One day, Wilbur found him in the kitchen scrubbing at his hands hard enough that they bled on their own- and the bandages around them had never completely come off, since then, at least in their view.

There was too much of an urge to keep them clean.

Phil knew about it. About the zoning out, about not being entirely there, about slowly losing himself to the dam that had been unblocked ever so slightly. Of *course* he did.

He tried to talk to Techno, tried to talk him out of it- but what did one do when trying to console someone on a quest to find themselves, no matter how hard the realizations came out to be? What could you do to course-correct someone headed straight towards one form of destruction or another?

The hands that were his own either became bloodied by punching something in the training room, scrubbing at them in the sink, or pricking them in the dark of night with needles. He had to pick his poison, he supposed- and it was just his luck that he consistently picked *every single damned poison in a row*.

Line everything you know up, all nice and neat. Wake up in the middle of the night and try and chase what you remember of thread enchantments, a notebook at your side. Clean your hands after you prick them. Hit a punching bag in frustration.

There was too much to keep track of. There were too many threads to tie together.

He ran circles and marathons in his mind and remembered the way that Simon had stared at him as he and Squid decided the final benchmark they'd race towards in sheer numbers of potatoes produced. Remembered what they had cheered on his victory with- Squid with champagne, Simon with water, and Techno with sparkling water because, well. Go figure.

He breathed in. Let it out.

Lost himself again to the rhythm of his own body.

Chapter End Notes

i can't decide if, after a certain point coming up very soon, i'll pull another hiatus or just lengthen the time between chapters so i can keep writing the next section of the fic. fun fact, it's still not entirely written! how do yall feel with longer chapters (maybe once a week?) compared to same schedule and a hiatus near the end of what i have so far? even if the one chapter a week thing may also require a (shorter) hiatus at the end? also i swear i'll respond to comments soon ive seen all of them but i get anxiety and even then i only respond to some i-

anyhow. i'm excited for what comes next.

i hope yall are too.

also i think i got a small raise at work which is sweet

xxix. go out with a whimper, not with a blast

Chapter Summary

Techno takes some time to think. Wilbur and Tommy hover. Teacher is often on the mind.

(Or: When you barely have control over your own body, days are hard to count.)

Chapter Notes

[chapter title from "message lost" by ferry]

mild tw for panic attack adjacent stuff.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“Slow down,” Phil told him over a call one day when he was busying himself with running his fingers over the pages of another notebook, trying to decipher the shorthand that he had written it all in as if he were decoding a completely different language. “I can’t- I can’t help you, okay? Please be careful for me? Wil and Tommy are *worried*, Techno. They’re- they’re so fucking *worried* about you, okay?”

“They are?”

Techno paused to think on it, mind sluggish as it had been for the past few days. He licked his lips. Let time slip by for just a second as he pondered it.

They were, weren’t they? The mirages at the corners of his vision weren’t mirages, after all?

He hummed, idle and rather out of it. It didn’t carry over the call to Phil.

“They are, Techno, they *are*. And they want to go with you to see whatever you want, you know? You don’t have to keep losing them. They’re just trying to stick with you and they... I...”

“I didn’t notice,” he said back, subvocalizing and only partially paying attention as his fingers stopped on one passage.

Someone was saying something. He pulled a few pages back, looked at an earlier section, and went back to what he had stopped on.

If he was correct, if what he had seen earlier in the notebook could prove it- this was about an interaction between protection and transference runes for water-breathing compared to a previous chain for filtering out dangerous air, trying to...to prove its viability with the clauses and sequences before will even factored into the equation.

Water breathing. Huh.

If he could just-

“Techno! Techno!”

“Mm?”

“...Did you not hear any of what I just...just said?”

He thought on it. Tapped his hard fingernails against the paper and let his hum filter over through subvocalization back to Phil’s feed. Breathed in and smelled lavender sharply in his nose, a scent that would never leave him for as long as he scented his clothes with it. Felt the crispness of the sheet of paper. “Can’t say I did, if you said anything after ‘stick with you’, Phil.”

“...Techno, we’re getting really worried.”

“Really?”

“*Really,*” Phil said, and, *oh*, his voice sounded- broken, of a sort. *Hurt.* Techno didn’t. Like that. “Are you sure you don’t want to come back home just yet? I’m sure- I’m sure your potatoes need some extra care-“

No. He was on a journey. He had a mission.

He wouldn’t stop until he had devoured that past life of his whole, had taken all of what he was and massacred it so that he could deal with the parts of him that ended up salvaged from the destruction, from the overflow.

“I planted a new variety from a few streams over in the world, past even where Hypixel can reach, I saved a few seeds for you just in case I fucked it up, I...”

He sighed. He was bored, bored, bored of it all. Bored of worry. Annoyed by others trying to lurk, trying to see what he was doing or stop him from what he wanted.

Or what his body wanted. That wasn’t quite the same thing, after all. He was as much a slave to his body autopiloting itself as he was his memories.

Techno clicked his tongue once, twice. Considered the passage under his hand with a detachedness towards the conversation that felt bad. Wrong.

He *should* listen to Phil.

He *should*. That didn’t mean he *would*.

“...I’ll talk to you later, Phil.”

“Wait- Techno- Techno, *please-*“

A mid-air flick of the hand. *Click*, went the communicator.

Silence.

He pondered the pages in front of him for a long while, mind contentedly near-blank until a good few minutes after the repeated calls from Phil silenced their incessant ringing in his head.

Perhaps...perhaps...what had he been thinking about, again?

Right. Perhaps the notes were onto something. *Perhaps-* perhaps he had to just keep his head above water for now, and everything would be fine.

Yes. That was their message. That was why he was looking at some kind of water-breathing rune sequence. Not because it was interesting.

Why would he be looking at it for the scientific aspect, anyways? It wasn’t...it wasn’t as if he understood it. Right?

He ignored that there was nothing symbolic about the chicken-scratch notes at all. Closed it.

Went back to staring, this time just at the closed book in his lap.

There was a knocking at his door.

He ignored it.

Tommy and Wilbur hovered, now. They leaned over his shoulder, they held onto his hand outside of the apartment tighter than ever, they asked *questions* and kept a *vigil*, of all things, and tried to get him to listen to some incessant chatter that never quite processed in his mind.

(Why were they talking about scamming, or this, or that? Why were Tommy’s hands waving about wildly? Why did he look so excited before he turned back to Techno and looked so... sad? Scared?)

He couldn’t identify that look in their eyes.)

They kept themselves nearby, kept themselves all nice and worried and worked up, and Techno went back to going through the motions of life as well as he could, still in the mire of memories and barely registering any of their words.

When they didn't crowd him, though- when they thought he was safely kept away in a training room or in his bedroom or, hell, even the bathroom- they de-stressed. Sometimes by watching television. Or by going on their communicators. By talking. By murmuring things they *thought* he couldn't hear- and while he could hear them quite well, not much of it got past the fog that had been gathering over his brain as of late.

It was hard to hear them through that incessant murmuring of the past in his head.

But what was important was that they relaxed by watching television.

By watching *Hypixel's* curated content.

When he silently walked out of the training room one evening, mind stuck on him watching videos and practicing different moves in there, stuck on eating ramen on the floor of a different training room from a different time when everything had been rearranged, he caught a flash of blood on a screen.

At the corner of his vision. In the living room.

He turned to see an arrow through someone's chest, sending them tumbling into the void, a shriek ripped loose from their throat. The stranger turned before the camera cut to someone splitting someone's skull with a heavy axe, laughing wildly as they fell to the ground- perfectly fine, perhaps, except for the fact that he knew a hit like that didn't cause such a pitiful-looking wound.

His next step fell heavy on the hard floor.

Tommy drew in a breath- a gasp, really- and started babbling about something or another, *I'm- shit, Techno, fuck, sorry, it's nothing, you can look away, Wilbur, Wil, get him to fucking look away I'm TRYING to turn it off, I-*

Techno, behind them, stayed fixated on that image that had long since passed. He knew how much force it took to make a sound like the television had emitted, after all, and what it would look like in the end.

He knew what kind of a wound a blow from a diamond-backed axe or even a netherite-cored one would do.

It didn't matter how much noise he made, the whine bubbling in his throat until it poured out, more of a snarl at that point than a cry, but it mattered that he made a noise at all.

The sound made his brothers turn from snapping at each other, panicked, with wide eyes and open mouths and gazes that drank him in- *all* of him, from his wrapped, half-bloodied hands to his sweaty skin to the horror in his eyes.

They said...*something*.

He ran- and ran, and ran, and *ran*- until the bathroom door was shut and locked behind him, until the door to the master bedroom was also shut and a chair propped up against the knob in

case they tried to go through there, until he could kneel down at the toilet and cough up everything from the dinner earlier in the evening.

Techno's heart pounded, enough to get him gasping after he finally got it all out, rubbing at his mouth with a bare arm before he choked on the panic and brought his hands up to once again press at his eyes.

There was a fog in his head. Yes. There was. It was slowly lifting but he still felt as if he were clawing up for air, breathing hard, shaking from where he was kneeling on the floor. His eyes stared out into nothingness. The not-quite-static fog was shifting, ever so slightly. Leaving, for a moment.

Something gave a noise. He twitched his ear.

Someone was calling him. Who? Who was calling him and making his communicator shriek in a way that made the back of his head ring horribly and-

Oh. It was Wilbur.

No, no, he didn't think he wanted to talk to Wilbur. Didn't want to think more than a second about the pounding on the door that he could only hear faintly beyond the *thump-thump, thump-thump* of his heart and the *thunks* of weapons hitting frail, breakable forms in his mind's eye.

Techno sat there, feeling sick and empty and just as breakable as the people he had broken himself with an axe or fifteen or a hundred so long ago, and tried to keep himself afloat.

Gods, how he tried to keep himself afloat, how he tried and tried and *tried* and-

Someone attempted to call again.

He didn't check who it was before he silenced it and crumpled more firmly to the floor, tears of frustration beading in his eyes.

Ring. Ring. Ring.

He silenced any notifications with a shaking flick of the ring fingers of his two hands. Went back to holding his face with them.

I thought this would be better. I thought this would get better. I thought. I thought.

I thought I would be in control for once that I could remember but I can't, I've never been in control never, never, never, this isn't better than before I want to go home I want to-

The fog slowly lowered back down.

The next day, after sleeping restlessly on the cold tile floor, he could barely remember exactly why his brothers were looking at him with such open concern. Couldn't quite remember *why* they were asking him so many questions.

Things were fine.

The haze was fine.

Tommy told him stories almost every day about this or that or anything just to drone on, even though Techno was in a haze that he hadn't crawled out of for- for how long, now? Half a month? A month? More?

What use was time when life was measured in memories regained, in snippets of context devoured up, of hating yourself and trying to go through the movements that the previous owner of your body had gone through, once upon a time? What use was time with all the scars collected on his skin or his clearly bloodied hands that signed a contract and couldn't get out until they wrapped up all of his organs in the barbed wire that meant life would never be how it was before, would never be the same, would never-

But.

Tommy told him stories. That was what mattered.

If Techno truly focused, if he used all of his energy to stay in the present, he could *think* about what Tommy told him about. Stories were spun of a man with a mask that had a smile painted onto it, meticulously worn and kept, who orbited around Tommy in chance of getting one of the record discs that Tommy loved.

Stories were told about moments where he and Wilbur did social experiments on temporary servers. Fun events. Rewards. Shenanigans. Tommy's smile was always a bit more relaxed, then.

If he *focused*, really, really *tried*, sometimes he could get to hear Tommy soften as he spoke about his friend, Tubbo, some more, of his bees and of his kindness and of the fact that he had fought with him and Wilbur and more in a war for the independence of their nation.

Nations. What a strange concept.

He echoed the sentiment to Tommy one- he couldn't be sure what time of the day it was, numbers were absolutely irrelevant- and watched, detached, as his youngest brother laughed- and laughed, and laughed, and *laughed*.

"What's so funny," he murmured, taking slow care that his words were not muffled. Not slurred. Tommy's laughter, at that point, was verging on hysterical.

"You say something to me for real for the first fuckin' time in ages and it's to be all weird about *nations*, of all things," Tommy gasped. Techno blinked at him, long and slow, and waited for him to explain while he kept memories at bay, while he only let a trickle of

Tommy-related ones filter through. A laugh. A spar. A petty argument. The shock of Tommy's hair as he darted through the forest of their home.

"I've *told* you about L'manburg before," Tommy said, and his arms were on Techno's shoulders. His hands gripped hard and tight and Techno sat very, very still as to not try and rip his hands off of him. "About Dream, about everything- about Schlatt! And this is the first time you say shit like *oh, nations are soooo fucking strange!*"

"Now that sounds familiar," he mused, unbidden, and watched as Tommy stilled in front of him. Tilted his head to watch Tommy stare at him, expression unreadable, and let his eyes blink again as he breathed out, long and slow and annoyed beyond measure. "That name."

He took a moment to think.

Ah. Yes. '*Schlatt*' was in his contacts. He...hadn't looked too much into him. '*Schlatt*' made him think of whiskey. Of meetings. He didn't want to think that much about meetings.

"You remember *Schlatt*, you say he sounds *familiar*," Tommy said, "and not- not- not anything that I told you after I came back home? We had- we had a whole conversation about Dream's SMP, we had- L'manburg, Pogtopia, we just made that, and *Schlatt*'s still the fucker *ruling over what we left for you-*"

"You forget," he said, slowly starting to lose that grip on the barrier that separated him from the rest of himself, words slowly slurring into each other the longer he went on, "that I am more focused on...on getting memories from before the...potatoes. I'm not. Thinking much about every single thing you've- you've told me. About... 'Burg'."

"...Of course you're not." A curse. "Of course, I-"

"I'll be in my room," Techno said faintly, well and truly gone from the conversation now that the story had stopped and very bored to boot, and swung himself out, let his shoes touch the ground and steady him. He swayed as he dropped by the little wine cellar room to pluck a bottle off of the racks, a small smile coming unbidden to his face. Techno waved with it, a little, to Tommy.

"Techno- hey, fuckin' come *back* here-"

The door shut behind him on Tommy. He locked it absently, considered the bottle in his hand, and set it aside in favor of losing himself once more to rummaging through the hidden corners of his room, the hidden drawers of his mind.

There was more to discover. There was always more to discover.

Emails to look at. Messages to decipher. That was what the fog liked to do, when it wasn't making him do anything else.

Not all of the memories could be processed, but he thought he was getting better at it, if he was a little generous with himself. He had been able to hold a decent conversation with

Tommy, even if a lot of it was Tommy speaking to him and him patiently listening. He was slowly mastering the funk that his body, his mind, put himself in.

Mastering it was better than being drowned and letting his body move on autopilot. Was better than needing to scream into a pile of sheets because there was simply too *much* going on in his mind at once, too much blood and death and fake smiles and photoshoots and the occasional glimpse of Phil's smile and his own childhood being the rare cherry on top and-and-

And the number of unread things in his communicator slowly but surely lowered. And lowered.

And the memories, once he went through all those messages- would they stop? Would they keep coming?

What kind of a person would come out from the other side, free of the shackles that he had been slogging through?

Eventually, only a few things hadn't been opened to take a cursory look through or deleted. Impossibly, *impossibly*, the deluge of memories slowed from a flood into a bubbling stream given time.

Techno had no clue how long it took for him to forget what he was doing or drift through life. Had no clue when he realized that he was the most attentive he had ever been, staring a hair to the side of Tommy during his ramblings and actually paying attention to his words, about a Dream, about death and conflict and spats. Had no clue when he realized that his gaze was following Wilbur's cooking and actually thinking about it. *Won't be eating that mac and cheese*, he thought, before his thoughts stuttered and went *Wait, what-*

He didn't tell his family about it. He let his standard poker face overtake him as he worried, as he looked back on the length of time- two weeks since he had first checked the emails, how in the world had he lost so much time, how, how, *how-*

He sat in his bedroom. Took deep breaths. Put his game face back on.

Thought about contracts. About memories that blurred together until he couldn't tell where one ended and the other began. About what was nightmare- Phil's bloodied face came to mind- and what was reality.

Techno contemplated, for a time, about the messy embroidery he had done in half a haze and how what he did while almost fully distanced from himself was somehow better. Thought about muscle memory. Intent.

A callback to another time:

Us thread enchanters get hunted down, Techno. It's almost a lost art.

Even further back:

Why did you decide to teach this to me?

A response.

You looked lonely. Anyways. Do you want to learn it or not?

A smile.

Eventually, only a few things hadn't been explored. And he was, impossibly, close to being back in his right mind.

And of course it was Teach that he hadn't taken the dive for. The person who featured in his memories so much even though he was pretty sure that he only had known of them for a few years. The person who had popped up, had wormed their way into his life, and then...and then...

He didn't know.

They were good friends. Or- well. Techno thought they were good friends, if how his memories played out were any indication. In-jokes. Shared smiles. Giving each other light punches for fun. Techno commenting on how Teach looked a bit stick-thin, kept themselves concealed. Shots back about how Techno looked in ads thrown across screens in the city.

Techno pressed his face into a blanket fresh out of the drier, a load that Wilbur had finished a few minutes ago to dump in his room. He hadn't acknowledged Wilbur. Went to lock his door afterwards.

And he was still here. Back to sitting on the floor, as it turned out, face in the blanket, breathing in deep.

Lavender.

Another breath.

Stronger.

Eventually, he had to deal with that elephant in the room. Had to confront whatever Teach was, if he had truly known them at all.

The one thing he had taken caution with in remembering was Teach. The one name that, for some reason, gave him apprehension and warmth in even measure even as they flitted in and out of his memories, always with that same smile, that same stare, similar clothing across the board.

Even the *thought* of opening those messages had Techno anxiously running his hands over the beaten up cover of the first notebook used for thread enchantments laid on the bed next to

him, the one that still didn't completely process to his jumbled up mind, the one that he looked at just as much as he did the other notebooks he had written, jumping from regular chicken scratch to a distracted shorthand like some alien form of clockwork.

Teach was fine. They were *fine*- if Techno knew one thing, it was that the experience of being taught the art had...if he thought about it, if he tried to piece the scattered and mauled timeline of his past back together through what he remembered- it had been the only thing truly keeping Techno on one path when he was mostly alone in Hypixel, not gone very often to visit family, trapped in contracts and the public eye and only having his home as a rare escape.

They had offered him an escape within that escape that he had gladly taken, a mug of a special blend of tea that went smoothly down his throat, unlike any 'vacations' that Quartz hummed about and whispered at the back of his mind, of ventures that others had wanted him to take that had been more for publicity rather than for any relaxation at all.

They had- they had *saved* him.

(Why? Why? It couldn't be because he was lonely, it *couldn't*-

Or could it?)

Why was he so *apprehensive* to- to see what they had sent him? The only thing his communicator could process and stream back to him in jolts of data in the general message log was whatever they had sent last- an idle message from, of all times, two weeks ago.

After he had started even looking at the messages.

Hope you're doing well, it said. *Even without a reply, I...*

What else was said there? How long had the message been in total? Would he ever open it up and be put at the top just like all the other experiences had been, ready to drink it all in and rejoice in whatever he found from the very last moment he had checked it when he had that other communicator?

What the hell did he expect to find, anyways?

It was morning. He only knew that because of the timekeeping that his communicator did, humming happily at him whenever he requested something of it. Not that it actually hummed happily. It just- *hummed*, for lack of a better word, at the back of his mind.

He breathed in. The blanket still, comfortingly, smelled like lavender. He set it down more properly on his lap.

The blackout curtains were still pulled over the windows. No mug was sat beside his bed. He was sat on the ground, cloak wrapped around him and notebooks either scattered around him or in his lap, only the light of a lamp giving any warmth to the room.

He took a deep breath. Pushed back the murmuring stream of memories that still wanted in and let himself fucking *focus*, for once.

If he needed it, the bottle of wine he had stolen- but not *really*, because it had been his to begin with- was still on his desk, not even opened. He could walk over and chug it all and be all the happier for it.

Techno steeled himself, let out a shaking breath, and opened the final message log.

He could feel the way that his mind stop-started. Could feel its shuddering halt.

The communicator preferred to transmit data in a way that let him catch up on what was being said. What was communicated first was the first thing presented, the very last message that he had seen before the communicator had broken. It was always the last thing he had sent or seen or whatever.

And apparently, Techno had been active enough in chatting with Teacher that he had been able to shoot in a last word, a last question before the fabric of his world went awry.

(Maybe he hadn't had the last laugh. Maybe he had been saving Teach's latest few messages for a rainy day or something but that rainy day had come and went and- and it was broken, and-

And it didn't matter. It happened years ago for him. *Months* for them- or possibly a year, if he could fucking figure out exactly how time had flowed *differently* but- nope. That wasn't for him. Would never be for him. Not with the data flowing into his mind. Not with the way his body shook as everything filtered in)

He let the words process, data trickling in before it came in a flood for him to see. Let himself parse through what was sent to him, line by agonizingly slow line, and didn't realize the dead silence in his mind until what his own last messages had been processed.

Oh.

Oh.

[techno]: Dream, do you think that it would have been worth it for me to cheat in the war by enchanting all of my farming clothing to go faster? To work longer? How fast could I have won with that? Maybe with an interlaced sequence?

[techno]: Answer me, nerddd

[techno]: Or I go back to farming

Well, then.

That was a breaking point for his own goddamn self that he had most *certainly* just passed.

Chapter End Notes

next chapter on tuesday. apologies for being later than usual!

most of yall saw it from a mile coming. keep in mind this was decided in late oct early november.

xxx. cage me like an animal / a crown of gems and gold

Chapter Summary

Techno and "Teach" debate the finer points of protection runes. A new challenger appears to face off against Hypixel's Blood God. Techno has a revelation.

(Or: It's a bit funny to face off against people decked out in full armor when your protection-threaded cloak does the same work for you.)

Chapter Notes

[chapter title from "human" by of monsters and men]

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

"So," he murmured, the end of his pen tapping lightly on some paper, "*theoretically-* could you manipulate the concept of 'protection' just enough that it would protect itself and the rest of the runes on the piece from being revealed without permission?"

Silence.

Perhaps he had mumbled a bit too much, perhaps he hadn't been very clear, had he gotten too comfortable with them?

"Teach- could 'protection' be altered just enough that-"

"No, no, I heard you just fine, Techno."

Techno slowed to a stop from where he was examining a long roll of paper, considering the intricate layout of runes in their painstakingly delicate single file line. At this point, well-*perhaps* the solution to his question laid in intention, but it seemed a solid choice to test if the runes interpreted the concept of what they were meant to *do* in multiple ways.

"I don't know if I need to rework the rune script, but I thought that I might, ah, be onto something with it-"

"Techno."

He blinked slowly from his hunched over position. Frowned. He let his eyes flick over in the direction of their voice, the twist to his lips rather annoyed. "If you're just going to laugh at me, go somewhere el-"

“It’s brilliant, Techno.”

The utter *awe* in Teach’s voice made him blink again and fully look up at them. Their face was as inscrutable as ever, constantly with that faint smile, but there had been a genuine excitement and some level of shock in their tone. They dropped the blanket they had been working on over the past few visits and fully moved so that now they were *both* leaning over the final draft of the script- and he could just *tell* that they were amazed.

“Techno- I- *man*, I haven’t looked at this too much, have I? You’re really a natural at it, huh?”

“...It’s been two years since you offered to teach me,” Techno said dryly. “Teach- you’ve had me do pieces before. What’s so special about this?”

“I mean, when you outlined what you wanted to do- I mean, a work like that’s supposed to be your greatest piece under an apprenticeship,” they breathed, “but *this*- this is a piece like you’d find if you saw someone who had already actively worked *years* in the field, man. Something *new*. Something truly- truly *inventive*. Even *I* didn’t innovate for my final piece under my teacher, man, I...holy shit.”

“I just asked you a question,” he mumbled, face hot and voice definitely slurring his words in embarrassment. “Really, I...”

“Even *without* that- and you probably would barely have to make alterations with the script except to add a modifier on the core Algiz to tell it that it even protects itself, I...and with *intent* adding on another layer, and the rune variants you’re using...”

A laugh, wheezing and bright. A tea kettle poised in unstoppable glee for someone else’s triumph.

“That cloak’s going to be fucking *unstoppable*, gods. How’d you even get your mind wrapped around that? Protection protecting *itself*, I can’t even...”

“Train with me for another thousand years,” he intoned flatly. Calmly. “Make *me* your teacher and I will show you the way. For that I must need only two things: your name and all of your worldly belongings.”

They snorted. A second later, another laugh bubbled up from the depths, wheezing to oblivion and back. Despite himself, Techno let himself break a smile to share with them. Good days, as few and far between as they had become as of late for his busy schedule, were things he probably had to take more advantage of.

“Really,” they laughed. “My worldly possessions? Never. But you’ll get my name soon enough, don’t you worry. Maybe when you finish that cloak, though, huh? How long do you think it’ll take you? Two, three months?”

“...Teach.”

“Techno.”

"You underestimate," he said gravely, "how easily I fall into crunch time. Anxiety fuels me."

"...Well, then, I guess I'm coming by more often to make sure you don't fucking die."

A snort.

Things were good.

Yeah.

Things were better than he could have ever hoped for, especially with the distance that had grown between him and his family.

He could be grateful that at least he saw one person outside of work with such regularity.

Grateful indeed.

"We have a new challenger to the stage in the grandest of grand King's Duel matches, one said to be as glorious, as deadly, as ascendant as the Blood God himself!"

The crowd *roared*. As removed as they were from the actual arena, set up in a floating, slowly spinning ring around it all, Techno had to once again faintly appreciate and admire the work that went into transmitting their cheers to the stage. He let himself form...not *quite* a smile, but something close.

It would be the last challenger of the day and finally, *finally*, after an evening of sweeping the competition and boredom, he could say a few closing words, go home, and rest.

The thought made Techno sigh deeply from where he was sprawled out on his gaudy throne of gold and rubies and emeralds, the very *picture* of bored, beautiful arrogance. His cloak, a new fixture of the past few weeks, still sent the crowd into fits when they saw it move- even if they never noticed the embroidery on its underside, never noticed the *power* that thrummed about it that only he could sense- it was amazing to them. Their champion, once in solid iron-and-netherite armor to match the competition, was now only clad in dress clothes, a cloak, and delicate gold armor that was meant to catch the eye and gleam, not protect and shield.

The concept of the reigning 'king' not wearing any armor in their bi-monthly challenges was still absolutely *novel* to the crowd. He knew how they all had to be murmuring to themselves, especially at the bodies arrayed out before him caked with blood compared to his nearly untouched form- multiple people all wearing sturdy armor, beaten out by a very good warrior with only an axe for a weapon and nothing shielding him at all?

Well, at least it spiced things up. They *had* been getting bored, especially as his reign had begun to truly cement itself as the longest-held kingship since, well...

Techno couldn't remember their name. He didn't care for the history of Hypixel, not like how he so admired the pantheons of the original worlds, layers of history twisting in on itself over there to form living legends.

Here, there was only glitz and glamour. Only falsehoods and overused tropes.

Only a king that never died, an immortal among those who were painfully mortal, reincarnated but never enough to kill him.

Only a man imprisoned by the chains he had signed off on.

He wondered if Phil was watching. He wondered if his oldest brother had ever truly checked in on what he was doing, and if he was doing so now- even though, by his knowledge, it was probably past dinnertime back at his little world. Techno wondered if Wilbur or Tommy were watching from afar, either, tuning in with their communicators just to see him dominate the competition with a lazy flourish.

(He wondered. He mused. He hoped.)

...Probably not. Phil, while supportive, had never quite found the fights enjoyable. Wilbur and Tommy probably watched occasionally, but...the duels had never been all that fascinating, had never been the most engaging of his appearances. They'd probably prefer Sky Wars, Hunger Games, anything big and large and multi-faceted.

Perhaps, though, that would change. Perhaps this new challenger would live up to the hype. Would, for the very first time, give him the battle of a lifetime.

The introduction trickled past, laborious and cruelly meandering along. For such a lengthy, showy display of shouting, he assumed that perhaps they had been holding back a wild card just to see how he would do- but apparently there were *titles* to list, *achievements* to describe, and a crowd to properly rile up.

And *oh*, how riled up they were- *clearly* they had heard of his new competitor, but it just made him tilt his head, disaffected by all the noise. Midly curious. Mostly bored.

...Come to think of it, maybe he should have actually kept a track on the rising stars and recent competition in the server. Techno usually had a policy to stay away from all of the hype, even with sponsorships and whatever Quartz wrangled him into with shows or celebrities or collaborations and everything else- he *wasn't* a team player, and somehow, he hadn't yet managed to completely burn that into the heads of who he worked with.

They had partnered him with some people before. Mostly brands, but sometimes people.

Techno had refused to talk to them at all. Barely looked at them. Fought one length ahead and refused to fall down from his pedestal.

That was, perhaps, a detriment to him now.

He didn't know his opponent's strengths. Their weaknesses. Didn't know if they'd crumple under pressure or if they'd thrive, thrown from the frying pan and into the fire to bloom

gloriously.

“And so the great Dream, after his two-year ascent to the highest rungs of Hypixel’s competitions, will finally stand against the Blade for you now- will the new wind of the server be able to blow back the reigning monarch? Will the Blood God finally be dealt his era’s end?”

As he tuned back into the announcements, hearing the sound increase as a tell to the upcoming entrance, he gave a soft snort. *Not likely, he thought, unless you have a hell of an ace up your sleeve.*

But the crowd *roared*- and for the first time, truly, since he had taken his spot at the top, he thought he could hear just as many cries in support of this Dream as there were for him. Less chants of ‘*Blood for the Blood God*’ and ‘*Techno never dies*’ and more… ‘*The Blade must fall*’.

Curious. Curious, curious, curious.

He would grind this upstart under his boot and make sure that he knew to *never* challenge the reigning monarch of Hypixel’s bloodbaths again. It didn’t matter however much he himself wasn’t fond of the role, the shackles that it placed him in, didn’t matter that he drowned every time he had to put on the crown and the filigree and put on the makeup only to go to a farce of a ‘duel’. He had to be the best, had to stay the best, had to drive himself above the rest and always reach higher tiers, the highest echelons of what was possible for a living, breathing being-

But for now, his focus was on one thing, and one thing only.

This ‘Dream’.

He let himself offer the first expression that night that wasn’t bored, disinterested, or holier-than-thou, and smiled thinly to the crowd. Listened as they roared and called for blood and watched the space where the competitor would appear in a twist of light.

You will not take my crown, he thought firmly, you-

You-

His eyes caught sight of the competitor.

At the back of his head, a ping reached him.

[teach]: Long time, no see, Techno.

Teach’s face- or, rather, the face that he gave to Techno, a blankly smiling mask, stared right back at him from where the new competitor had been transported in. The new competitor.

The rising star- the hope for people to defeat him, the- *the-*

Teach stared back at him. Impassive. Head tilted ever so slightly.

No, *Dream* stared back at him- for that was their name, wasn't it? The name that they had always dodged around, perhaps in the effort of making sure he didn't know who he was until now? Would it have been worth it to tell them- tell *him*- how uninterested Techno was in his competitors, worth it to rant about how Hypixel's system had chained him down, so that he would have been entrusted with it sooner?

Despite the shock that still rattled him, Techno managed something of a smile. A true smile, at that. Something terrible, something that only *some* people would call a grin while others would call it a spike in bloodlust, in excitement, in cold, hard *fury*- and the crowd absolutely lost it. They erupted in screams, cries, shouts for one to triumph over the other.

Perhaps Dream was why, in the waiting rooms before the event, someone had come over to put some makeup on him after the first time he had shown up with his full face exposed, out of a helmet. Perhaps this finale was why they made sure to style his hair when they usually never bothered, something he had always ignored-

But he didn't care.

He didn't care, because his damned *teacher* was in front of him, posture all faux-relaxed and deceiving, and he could only wonder how much Dream had fooled him. He hadn't seen a fighter in his teacher, had only seen someone who loved their craft, who wanted to share it, who knew parts of what he was struggling through but not all of it.

He wondered, most of all, if it would be just as easy for him to spill Dream's blood as it had been for him to mow down everyone before him.

Now this- *this* was what he loved about it all, despite the hatred for the rest of it that sunk down deep into his bones and curdled there.

This was why he endured the horror of cutting down the near-defenseless. This was why he suffered through it all and stayed bored and complacent to the public while training himself tirelessly behind the scenes, while going to this event and that. *This* was why he stayed here- or perhaps it wasn't, but that was what his body was convincing him of every second he sprawled there on his throne and *stared*.

There was a thrill in meeting someone who had the potential to be your equal- to see it in the way that their posture subtly shifted, hand readied at their side to grasp at their chosen weapon- a sword, he saw, mass-manufactured and shiny with careful maintenance. There was a bloody delight in wanting to see how someone you knew measured up to the blade they carried and to test their edge, a frenzied desire in wanting to rip someone's mask off and then tear out their throat if they took so much as a misstep.

He always fought to get *better*, to get better and better for when things truly *mattered*, to help and protect and shield-

Here, though?

Here he could unleash it all and become, without much remorse at all in the moment, the true Blood God which the public went insane over. He could spill blood and ignore blades ripping at him because the fight would be fun, fun, *fun*.

Techno rose to his feet as the crowd slowly grew quiet. He straightened his posture and watched as Dream's head tilted subtly, definitely following his movements. He wondered, not for the first time, if the mask was engraved on the underside with enchantments of protection or concealment or something to shift attention off of it, because he had barely paid attention to that part of Teach- but he knew, at least, that *something* on him was embroidered just the same. Knew that there was some hidden surprise. Knew that they would be fighting beyond just a simple hack and slash for the enjoyment of those watching, shielded even though neither of them had proper armor on.

Arrogance, the media would probably spin it. *Foolish challenger takes on the reigning monarch and loses by a landslide because he has no proper armor. The Blood God can take it, but newcomer Dream can't.*

Probably not a landslide, if the way that Dream settled back and rocked on his heels was any indication. If the way that Techno could feel the threads of the world pulling was any indication, all of his strings tied up in the rising heat of an upcoming fight just as Dream's were, intertwined at this very point in a knot that spoke of exhaustion through tireless training, fighting, living.

He took his axe off of where it rested, the giant damned thing that it was, and let the heavy weapon gleam.

The arena was utterly silent.

"If you wish to defeat me," he said out loud, voice ringing with a crispness that spoke of bemused practice and *irony*, eyes locked on that *damned* mask even as the crowd, as Dream, as the outer world heard every syllable, "you must train for another thousand years."

The voice that he expected, equally amused even through the serious nature of the conflict, excitement rising in his throat just as much as Techno suspected he had sounded just then, echoed him in an ever-smiling response:

"I think I can skip that training montage just fine, thank you very much," he said cheerily, and he performed a little jaunty bow, flourishing the sword as he equipped the shield that had rested silently on his back. "My blade shall be your downfall, *Techno*- no matter what you call yourself, Techno, Blood God, the *Blade*—"

He tossed his sword high up in the air, and Techno could see the way the edge on it *gleamed*, an echo of the day, he remembered, when he had done a flashy move with Tommy and *oh-*

Techno swept out his axe just in time to watch the ringing edge of a stolen, grimly tarnished blade greet a grand weapon bloodied with the remains of those Techno had offed over the

past two or so hours. He looked at Dream, locked eyes with that mask, and let that smile of his turn truly amused, truly cruel at the same time.

I told you about training with my younger brother, even if we never talked names.

“My, my,” he said with his signature flat tone, the amusement coming across just fine, “what a dirty trick to use on *me*, of all people.” The pristine sword Dream had thrown was stuck in the ground. The one that was against Techno’s own blade was inferior. Slightly chipped.

“You nearly fell for it, *Techno*,” Dream murmured- and by the way his tone went, it was obvious that he knew even the quietest of words were picked up. “Getting sloppy.”

It was silent enough to hear a pin drop.

“That’s the King of Hypixel, to you,” he said to him, and with a push they were back to their original positions, Dream tossing the sword aside to pick up his own from where it had fallen.

They stared at each other, king and challenger, cloak waving in the wind and mask eerily staring back.

Techno raised his chin ever so slightly. *Come at me*, he beckoned silently. *Bring me your downfall.*

Their threads crossed.

The faster of the two, Dream’s agility and speed let him dart forwards, and Techno truly *laughed* for what seemed the first time in ages in public, the bloodlust making his heartbeak quicken as he struck out, the crown on his head gleaming holy-bright, the drumbeat of true battle knocking its rhythm into his skull for the first time in what felt like *forever-*

“Get ready to lose,” he breathed, and only got a light, panting laugh back.

The Blood God would not lose today.

The Blade became a whirlwind of destruction- and even Dream would be helpless in its wake.

Even his dear teacher would succumb to a temporary death’s embrace.

For the first time in so, so long, Techno found himself well and truly lost to the beautiful song of blood.

How beautiful.

Chapter End Notes

originally this was one chapter with the previous, but it got long enough to separate. i think the end of the last one is good, anyways.

from now on, **chapters will be posted once a week!** i need to keep up an editing buffer while i also write more for this- as this has spiraled out of control, although we're definitely past the halfway mark, god. i'm also working on another project..although the fruits of that labor won't be seen for a while yet.

chapters will be posted **tuesday evenings** although the exact time is up in the air. for what that means for you: i'm in CST, so take that into account.

have a lovely day. i read all of the comments even if i don't reply. :")

xxxi. broken bones are stronger for the breaking

Chapter Summary

The room is dark. The die is cast. Techno opens his eyes.

(Or: A comrade in one reality is a murderer in the other.)

Chapter Notes

[chapter title from "little mercy" by doomtree]

tw: panic attack, distancing from reality

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

[teach]: I'm not sure that cheating with enchantments in a war of that nature would even be meaningful to yourself. Going back on your commitments already, are you?

[teach]: Wait, you won that already, why are you even considering doing something so useless?

[teach]: Hey, are you here? Were you really considering that?

He had to laugh. Oh, gods, how Techno had to laugh, how he wanted to laugh and cry and scream until he hacked his lungs out, memories daisy-chaining themselves together as he shook and silently gasped and stared out into nothing, feeling only the fabric clothing his legs as he tried to grasp at them.

He needed lavender tea.

No, no, he *didn't*. Techno- he- he was stronger than that. Everything was *fine*, and it would be fine just as long as he gave exactly no thought at all to the fact that his teacher and Dream were one and the same.

Dream, who two of his brothers still spoke about in dark, angry tones.

Dream, who gave Tommy a haunted, pissed off look in his eye, who made Wilbur's lips twist in derision as they discussed the past, who made Tommy's voice break whenever he spoke about his discs and about the fact that he had felt his life leave him from an arrow, of all

things, shot by the hand of the *admin of the fucking server* who could have turned off the respawning ability of the server on a damned *whim*-

Dream was the same person as the one who- who had taught him so much. Who had provided him an escape from life in the hell that he had called home in Hypixel, in some form or fashion, for years. Who had given him a fight far beyond what any other person had ever been able to give.

Fuck.

How could he reconcile the person who had taught him such a beautiful craft with the person that still made Tommy curse and cry and shout? How could he reconcile kind, amused words with someone who he could only imagine spoke in clipped tones, in harsh ultimatums and stood with a diamond-straight posture?

His brothers still carried scars from small-scale war and more. He knew it, he knew it.

“Dream tried to offer me a few things, a week or so before we headed back home,” Wilbur had told him mildly one night while Tommy was the only one asleep in the apartment. Techno had only been half there, mind far away in a land of glamour and photoshoots. *“After fighting with him on something so huge? I...I don’t exactly know why I’d want TNT right off the bat, Techno. Especially from him.”*

Techno had hummed. Angrily, a little.

“...Yeah. Night, Techno. See you, uh, soon. Yeah.”

Dream hadn’t done anything that he couldn’t fix, given time, but- was it even worth it to give him the time to try, if his brothers said he hadn’t seemed repentant? Was it worth it to let it go and watch Tommy still flinch when he saw a bow and arrow pointed in his direction, watch Wilbur’s eyes go hard and cold whenever he talked about a time of war?

(What did war even *mean*, on such a small server? Did it mean skirmishes? Did it mean a siege? Did it mean near-death after near-death after near-death until nobody ended up a true winner?)

He couldn’t-

He couldn’t.

He plain couldn’t reconcile the two figures in his mind, couldn’t merge them together even as his memories whirled around the very fact and tried to merge two different versions of himself together at the same time. As he raced through the messages Dream had sent him- increasingly worried about Techno’s lack of response, it seems, and went further back with every flick of his finger- he found confirmation that these two really were the same.

Wilbur’s name, sprinkled in, no last name. A mention of a war. A revolution that was played off as more of a game than of something that could give someone a very real form of trauma.

But what did it matter, right now?

He-

There was an impossible divide between the two Dreams he saw in his mind's eye despite the way that they orbited around each other, even as they fell into what the other had and laid over each other in a parody of togetherness. There was a shake in Techno's hands, fine and holding the weight of his own personal worldview as he went, and Techno...

How much was there to follow?

How many tabs did he have to keep open in his mind to make sense of it? How many folders did he leave open to try and organize the scattered nature of his thoughts and frantically beating heart? Dream was his teacher, the one who taught him thread enchantments- and they had both lived in a world of combat for sport and killing, death that did not stick due to the manipulation of the fabric that made up the server's backbone. They both lived in cutting down enemies and pushing down remorse for that very moment, and he suspected that the man had dealt with some of the same trappings he had, in Hypixel- sponsorships, media, people.

(Had he really? From what he remembered, Dream, Teach, had seemed confused by what he had mentioned. Had tilted his head whenever Techno spoke of sponsors and schedules packed to the brim with what was required by his contract. Had either neatly avoided conversation on the topic or played it for laughs.

... Why hadn't he been in a similar situation, if so? Why? How? *How?*)

But.

Dream was, according to his brothers, the *main admin* of the little server they played and lived on. It was *Dream's* server, they had said, owned by him and *controlled* by him, the weave of that reality only stitched together because he maintained the connections, repaired any loose threads and tucked them neatly.

He had been an admin- one of a very few in the wider universe suited to the role.

And one of a very few among *those* very few that could manage the task of...of letting a world have the lifespring that was respawning. The blessing that was life after death.

...No, no, that was too much. That was too much, too much, too *much*. There were too many balls to juggle right there for him to accurately focus on any one thought for an amount of time, but- how interconnected *were* they? How often had Dream tread the same path as him, running parallel before they both diverged in all those different ways?

His teacher had, for the most part, stopped visiting him around the same time as Wilbur and Tommy had joined that server.

His messages, if he could tell time correctly- and he couldn't- spoke of frustration, around that time. Of record discs. Of friends in a small server playing a game.

If he imagined things just right, he could picture Dream in the shitty outfit of his, thrumming with hidden thread enchantments, hovering over Tommy's limp form. He could imagine him inspecting the arrow that had done the job, could picture exactly what came next- a triumphant tilt of the head. A relaxation of the shoulders.

A thought:

He wanted to kill Dream.

Wait.

Where had *that* thought come from?

He wanted to tear him down from the damned pedestal he had put himself up on. He wanted to tear that mask off and finally see what it hid, wanted to try and loom over Dream in a mockery of how he must have leaned over Tommy and challenge him for the power he held. He wanted to- to-

Techno wanted it to *hurt*. There was nothing he desired more than to hunt him down and show him how he *shouldn't've done that*, nothing more lovely to him than the concept of screaming in his face and drawing his axe just as he had done that fateful day and-

No, no, *no*.

That *wasn't* what he wanted.

He didn't *want* to fight. He had *never* wanted to fight. He would rather sit down and have an awkward conversation that skirted around what he didn't want to happen. He'd rather smile thinly and fight through words even if it meant some raised voices in an enclosed room or empty field instead of talking with blades and blood and fists.

Why, then, had he thought of- of *hurting* him? Of killing someone who, before realizing that the Dream who had taught him things and the Dream who had hurt his brothers were one in the same, he had respected and cared for?

Techno laughed.

He laughed long and hard and bright, breathing erratically as the laughing turned into crying at the turn of a dime, crying into laughing into panicked gasps as shards of the past flew at him left and right, as he let his hands reach up into his hair and grab to try and focus himself on the present.

Techno had to bring himself back. He had to *think*, had to center himself and not go flying off at one thing or another. There were emotions in him so influenced by memories, by everything that flew by- of Dream, of fights at Hypixel, of banquets and functions and of a sky of red washed in pale purple that he refused to call lavender- who was he? What was he thinking?

Was the him that was thinking his thoughts the person who he wanted to be? Was it the same him that existed twenty minutes ago, the him that had been forgotten, or the him that just

wanted to farm and relax and not think of much else?

Remembering was good.

No. Remembering was horrible. It was great. He hated it with all of his heart. He wanted it more than anything.

At this point, it wasn't just about Dream, or just about Quartz, or just about a lonely apartment with nobody to truly speak to. It was about everything he had remembered combining together in one hellish spiral to end them all, something that wanted to take and take and take from every last piece of his tapestry before it ever gave anything back, even though all it was doing was throwing pieces of the past at him.

It wanted to take his sanity. His mind. It wanted to shred the him that had existed a month ago, when he was still new to the Hypixel server for the second time and still dipping his toes in, and try to morph him back into who he once was.

Techno-

Techno was *scared*.

He wanted to go back to when things were alright and he was nice and safe in the private server, back with Phil, but he couldn't go back, could he? It was an impossible task. All he could do was keep moving forward but *that* was impossible, too, when realizations he didn't want to face blocked his way, when the turmoil of what he was thinking had the power to bring him to a screeching halt.

He wanted *Phil*, he thought, gripping at his hair tighter, and tried to navigate through his communicator with the twitches of his fingers still grasping at himself.

It was impossible to get anywhere useful, to go back to the main page or even navigate to more messages with the frantic, scattered nature of his mind. He managed to get himself more lost than ever in what the communicator had to offer because he refused to fucking *let go*. There was no calling Phil, not tonight. There was no respite from the demons in his head and no ability for him to silence them at all, but he couldn't progress to even a point where he could breathe.

His wants were conflicting.

His mind, his very *soul* was conflicting, and he couldn't figure out which of his thoughts came from which part of himself. What was the bloodthirstiness that made him want to rattle Dream around until he repented? Where did it come from, what was its source material? Was it from the him that truly called the man a friend or was it the him that only thought for the protection of his brothers?

Was it two sides anymore, or was it even more multifaceted? Was it the before and the now or the defender, the child, the farmer, the king, everything shattering into a broken mirror of the past?

He didn't *have* multiple personalities stacked inside of him, he knew, but sometimes it felt like there was absolutely nothing he could do to stop that shattering, to stop all of the little things that made him who he was from separating.

But who, when it came down to it, was *Techno*?

He groaned. Pressed his hands into his eyes sharp, hard, letting those black and white fireworks splash the back of his vision as he kept them pressed, kept them on him, kept them firm.

Did he even deserve to use that name? *Techno*?

Techno.

Tek-no.

A phrase in one language and a very different term in another. In the gnashing syllables of the piglin language, *Tek-no*, *Techno*- a child that was unwanted. A child that nobody would take in for it was too meek, or too aggressive, or too other. A child that would not contribute to the needs of a group when it grew up was not wanted. Something borne of a human and a piglin was despised even more. Unnatural. Ugly, to them, with the smoother skin and slimmer features than the strength they found beautiful.

“What’s your name, kiddo?”

He stared up at the strange man, with that pale skin like his, surrounded by a color that he had no name for on the ground and draping across the trees, the strange cast of the blue sky over them, not warm enough to be natural.

Techno mouthed the words, the more common language almost alien to him. His mother had barely known it. Had only taught him a few words, garbled as they were by the way she said it.

Name. That was the important word. The one he knew.

His mother had never named him. The world outside his original cave had.

“*Techno*,” he said out loud, unable to say it with the particular inflection that the true words had. It slurred together, a soft tongue and mostly flat teeth, the tusks offering some of the twist to it but not nearly enough to give the true meaning.

It didn’t have the anger. Didn’t have the disgust, or the vehemence, or the strength in it.

“*Techno*,” the man repeated. Smiled. Pointed at himself. “I’m Phil.”

“Ey’ mphil,” he parroted back. Pointed at him with one small hand.

A laugh.

“Phil. Phil.”

“Phil,” he said next, and watched that smile grow warmer. Grow softer.

A child who had never been wished for and a man that...well. That word didn’t make any sense to him. Maybe it was just a word language thing.

...Even though he was wary- had been for a while, ever since he had found this man- there was something that softened him up. Techno regarded Phil with stony eyes. His hands still clutched at the red-rock sword he had brought with him from his home world.

Even though he was wary, he knew this man’s name now.

And a name was a beginning.

Unwanted. Child-unwanted. Not needed.

And even as he grew to learn another language properly, that name had stuck.

He wanted to break.

Techno rose from where he had been sitting on legs that shook like a fawn’s, hands finally leaving his head to grasp at anything they could, flailing around to grab anything, to feel *something*. He ignored the shattering of a lightbulb from the lamp until he realized that he was well and truly in darkness that the blackout curtains provided and he couldn’t be trapped in here with only himself to keep him company, with no way to navigate the room when he was in such a damned state-

What was that keening noise?

What was the terrible squealing that echoed in the room, the sound that turned into a pained howl that gasped and shuddered and shook?

He clasped his hands over his ears.

The sound didn’t stop.

Oh, he thought faintly, deliriously, wildly. The sound is me. The body I inhabit is making that sound and I do not know how to stop it.

How do I stop it?

How- how- how-

The door to his room opened with a *bang*. His voice rose to a fever pitch as he stumbled back, right onto his bed, and Techno gained his bearings just enough to scramble away further, tumbling over the bed and scrambling to the nearest wall as faint light filtered through the room.

Light that framed a body. That framed someone he- someone he- someone he couldn't recognize.

“Techno- Techno, gods, *fuck*, what happened, I’m here, do you need anything, I swear, everything’s alright, Techno-“

He nearly screamed when they got closer, voice cutting off from a horrid screech to let his hands rise back up to his hair and grab and stay there, right up by his scalp and allow him to go right back on into gasping.

The pieces were falling together.

There was too much to *think* about, a fallen sky of hell reigning above a king that soullessly, ruthlessly murdered all who crossed him, warm nights spent looking down on a city with an embroidery project in his lap, talks on a peace treaty over potatoes. There was too much to process, honey whiskey sliding down his throat to burn in silence as he negotiated a deal that would never truly fall in his favor, the death of his voice as he stared down a crowd at a painfully young age, not yet practiced enough to speak clearly around his tusks, pork flavored ramen in a steaming bowl, deals and photoshoots and his brothers around him-

His mind shut down.

Or, rather, it just stopped trying to process the flood. It bluescreened and it walled itself up and if Techno let out a rather feral snarl as whoever was in the room approached him further, it didn’t matter. Techno was going to stay there and he wouldn’t. Go. Away. He refused to let any of it be the end of him. He refused to bow and scramble back much further and let himself bare his teeth, show off his tusks that, given the right move, could get as much blood on them as he wanted.

(Why was bowing even part of the equation? What was going on?)

What *was* he?

At this point, was he a brother or a monster? Was he a farmer or a god? As the person cast in shadows approached, he could only drape himself in the robes of the monster and try his hardest to keep himself from lashing out.

But he remembered, now.

He remembered just the right way to pull a dirty trick and wipe someone’s feet out from under them. When the unknown person in the room rounded the bed, he let his leg kick out, precise and dangerous even in the extremely low light. Techno went for the *kill* and went

from prey to predator in a split second, caught up in changing emotions just enough for his steel-edged whimper to turn into a bloody howl.

He lunged and let his mouth open, knew that his tusks were as dangerous as any sword, wondered if the crowd would go wild for this or go as still and quiet as they did when he reminded them that he was something other than a human parading around as something just a bit more, reminded them that he was a *piglin hybrid* and the tusks were *not* for show-

“*TECHNO!*”

The howl died in his throat.

He stayed there, lurching above the intruder, until some of the fog cleared from his eyes, until *enemy* turned into *unknown* and turned right around into *brother*, the form under him becoming more and more recognizable in the low light as *Wilbur* instead of *foe*.

“Techno,” Wilbur breathed, eyes wide and body twitching, “it’s- it’s me. Wilbur. Your brother.”

He breathed in. Out.

I nearly hurt my brother. I nearly tried to kill him. I. I.

Wilbur stared up at him with the air of a man that had just avoided death by a very, very narrow margin.

“Techno. What the hell is going *on* with you?”

Chapter End Notes

a lot of things have been going on lately, irl and around the internet for me. i hope everyone's doing alright, and that they enjoyed the chapter- even if it hasn't advanced much at all.

(apologies for those who thought the fight would continue, but it wouldn't quite contribute much. and i can't do fight scenes.)

stay safe! do things! have fun! i'll continue to sit here and write. and stuff. whew.

xxxii. pray for rain (but) brace for whiskey

Chapter Summary

The night rolls on. Wilbur and Tommy are the most concerned yet. Techno tries to calm down.

(Or: You can take the hybrid out of the Nether, but not the Nether out of the hybrid.)

Chapter Notes

[chapter title from "warsaw" by dessa]

small tw for recovering from panic attacks!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Here was a secret:

When he was a child, Techno hadn't spent every single waking moment simply surviving. His mother, a piglin cast out from her pack from consorting with a human not clad in gold, had taken care of him until he was at the minimum age that a piglin child would stand a chance, living and surviving on their own.

He had not been a piglin child.

He had been a piglin-human *hybrid*. He had still been working his way around the words that his mother had given him, a few years old and living in a cave that had the bare essentials in life for a short time, and for all that he had been comforted by his parental figure, she had never intended to keep him with her for his whole youth.

She had loved Techno. Yes, she had loved her child, and Techno had loved her right back.

But she had wanted to go find herself a new pack, and nobody would permit an outsider that smelled of not-piglin and instead of human-offspring. There was the distinct smell of not-ours not-safe, and despite her love, she wasn't going to live with a burden leeching off of her for forever. She had told that to him in a soft voice, no matter the harsh tongue that she cooed to him in, and for all he had cried and nearly screamed at her about it, his little form had understood.

Somehow, he had understood.

He had been left on his own, a child with thoughts still only half-formed, and he had looked around his cave home and thought, with the abstract ideas and thoughts and feelings that children had, *I cannot stay here.*

And he had survived.

Past all the odds, he had survived- he built a foundation of combat out of next to nothing, had learned how to trap creatures or steal leftover carcasses for food, knew which mushrooms were just right to eat and which should be left for later because they roasted nicely when left just above lava for a minute or two.

He knew how to take down someone over double his size, after enough time. He had figured out how to topple those that wanted him dead, whether alone or in a pack, and he had never come across his mother. Had never needed to utter the word ‘mother’ again in his tongue.

He had dipped his hands in lava and found himself not terribly damaged by the experience, the Nether’s blessing to many of its children. Burns, sure, but the molten liquid had never hurt him beyond that. The slight gradient of his arms could attest to him fishing around for this or that in there, grabbing the smaller creatures that striders ate so that he could gnaw on it as lava-toughened jerky.

Techno clawed his way out of a hell-violet spun world and there was no part of that realm that truly left him, even when he found his way into a world with colors that he could not name, could only invent words for through context and ideas and half-formed thoughts, echoed in the softer tongue that the man he met introduced them to Techno in: *Blue. Green.* Additions by his own mind: Not-lava. Lavender-dark-rock. Blaze-bastion-shine.

But no part of that world ever left him at all.

And Wilbur, the foolish child that he was, had assumed that the very moment he spoke a mostly-clear phrase of their language to him that he was civilized. That he was concepts like *well-mannered* and *kind*, despite all the evidence to the contrary.

Of course, his older brother ended up getting himself half-gored for his troubles.

And of course, there had been consequences for that- just as there were consequences to how he loomed over Wilbur now, breathing hard and struggling to maintain even a fraction of his composure, there in the darkened room they were both in.

You don’t hurt your brothers, Phil had told him so long ago, the memory faint in his mind but appearing now as he panted, as he hung over Wilbur and found himself frozen by shock and the weight of what he could have done. *Not me, not Wilbur. Something like that could have serious consequences, and there’s only so much potions can do, okay?*

You could take the hybrid out of the Nether, but you could never take the Nether out of the hybrid. There was still an animalistic nature to its civilizations. There was still the bone-deep instinct of hunt, kill, protect yourself through force. Might is right, despite a thriving practice of trade and commerce.

The only way to learn was to throw yourself into the lava and keep pushing, to either surface or drown under the weight of it, heavier than the water of the overworld ever pretended to be except in its deepest reaches.

Sometimes, that meant consequences. Sink or swim. Possibly hurt yourself in the process.

In the present, he breathed in, out, heavy and staggered. He stared down at Wilbur and tried to not fall down.

In. Out. Ignore the communicator singing counterpoint to his heart beating at double speed.

A second later, he sat back, squatting instead of fully sitting down.

He was a monster, wasn't he?

"Techno- Techno, please answer me, I swear, you were screaming and *howling* and- and- was it just a nightmare?"

He could barely hear Wilbur. What he could more properly hear was the heavy beat of blood in his ears, a chant from memories resurfaced chasing that sound in an instant:

Blood for the Blood God.

Blood for the Blood God.

He had nearly gored his brother. Had nearly added him to a list of people that had died to his tusks, no matter how many had respawned afterwards, and then what would've happened? Would he have thrown up? Run away?

"Wilbur," he breathed, the sound rattled and unstable and aching for anything that could be given to soothe. He slid back on the floor, fell on his ass, and scrambled further until his back was against a wall. "Wilbur. *Wil.*" His hands shook, the cool air making his skin prickle, no fabric soft enough to run his palms against. His breath froze in his throat before it made its way out, unlike any moment of panic he had truly had before, and he nearly keened again.

He would have sprinted off and become nothing, wouldn't he?

Or— perhaps not. He could have just forgotten the last time, just like how he forgot everything, just like how he forgot his teacher's name was Dream as to connect the dots that he was the same person that *killed Tommy-*

"Yes," Wilbur's voice broke in, soft even with the undercurrent of genuine anxiety. "It's me. What's going *on*, Techno? I...I need to know what's going on if I can help- help you. What do you need?"

He forcibly shut down all notifications from his communicator once he could gather himself enough to navigate its labyrinth of branching paths to work it, stopped the buzzing at one corner of his mind. Tried to ignore any and all memories that tried to sneak past even as thoughts of Wilbur's young, terrified face flashed in his head.

What the fuck, a younger Wil had screamed. That prick, he nearly- nearly- I thought you taught him shit and got him all human-ed up, Phil! You bastard!

In a thread of the past, he stared back at that smaller Wilbur. Had growled and barely restrained himself.

Not an enemy. Not an enemy.

He's not an enemy.

“Rememberin’,” he gasped quietly, trembling from his spot. “Don’t- don’t- don’t come any closer, I can’t, I *can’t*, Wilbur, it’s too much, too much, too, too...”

“Okay. Okay. Everything’ll be fine, okay? Just...just focus on me. Do you remember any grounding techniques, Techno?”

He shook his head once. A sharp, curt movement. Wilbur’s breath came out tense, came out trembling almost like his own, a fine tremor that he only picked up because of his well-tuned ears.

“Well, lucky me, I remember one that- that you liked. First, you-“

“What the *hell* is going on-“

“Tommy.” Wilbur’s voice flipped from soothing to an order that could not be disobeyed in a split second, an older brother’s unflinching command. “Out. Now. Go make some lavender tea for him. For us, actually. Make extra.”

A pause.

“I-*fuck-* okay, Wil.” Techno listened as footsteps quietly went away.

“I want you to name me five things you can see in this room,” Wilbur murmured, doing an excellent job of hiding any nervousness, any fear from being knocked down, from having to pick himself up and crouch right in front of where Techno was falling apart into bare pieces of his whole. “Just five things, okay? As long as you tell me what they are.”

His whole life had been defined, in some way, by fighting. He had fought to survive after he was left alone, roaming the Nether of a small server and just trying to get enough food to eat, making sure that he didn’t die from wounds. He had fought to learn a language after Phil had found him, made sure he could understand the major customs among regular people and speak their language well enough that they wouldn’t turn their noses down at him.

He had fought in Hypixel- to dominate, and then a more figurative form of fighting against companies, against sponsors, against restrictions.

Now, he was just fighting to keep his head above the fucking flood of his panic. Of his memories. Of his misery.

Five things.

He could do that, right?

"I- I- five things," he repeated to himself out loud, so far past the point of clear, crisp language but- Techno had to pretend that everything was going fine, that his voice was clear, that Wilbur had absolutely no difficulty understanding him.

Techno took a deep attempt at a breath. Wheezed it out.

"I see you," he said, and watched as Wilbur's face flickered for a second between the version he had first seen in his memories, a child with a softer face and gently laughing eyes twisted from anger into calm, to this more angular version, the one with a tired, panicked gaze. "I see...I see a wardrobe." He paused. "A closet," he corrected, because it was something between a wardrobe and a closet built into the wall. He could focus on those details. It blocked out the worst of the storm brewing inside of him, ready to burst. "You."

"Good," Wilbur murmured. "Three more, okay?"

That was a number. That was the correct number left. Yes.

If he lost focus for more than a second, he could taste blood sitting heavily on his tongue.

"The bed," he said, because he was right beside it. His shoulder was against its side, pressing into its wooden frame with enough pressure to probably bruise, given enough time. "The curtains." In the low light, he could see those, at least. He tried, for a second, to match Wilbur's breathing before he lost the thread of it again. Always threads, always tapestries, *what an apt metaphor considering-* "A picture of Techno on the wall."

Wilbur blinked. "A- a picture..." He looked behind him, to where a worn-down poster of Techno was. "You..."

He blinked, rapid and fluttering, before he realized his mistake. "A picture of *myself*," he amended, and tried not to let his breathing cascade into near hyperventilation again. "A picture of myself."

Was there a divide in how he viewed versions of himself? What had made him say that?

Did he feel like someone other than Techno?

Had he ever felt like the person they thought he was?

"Four things that you can feel, now," Wilbur said, just like everything was fine again. No sign of brotherly freaking out. *Nothing's fine, though, Wilbur, how can you hide it all so well?* "Feel. Touch. Things that are tactile."

"I can feel the carpet," he started, letting one free hand run along its rough surface. He brought it up to reach the bedsheets on the mattress next to him, but couldn't focus on it in favor of the hard edge of its frame. "The frame of the bed." If he focused, he realized that one of his hands had been clenched in his hair for the past minute. Perhaps that was what the momentary clarity was, alongside the bedframe. "...I can feel myself pulling on my hair."

“...Can you let go of it? And one more thing.”

“I can feel my shirt.” Loose, comfortable, smooth in a way that even the dress shirts he had worn often hadn’t felt like. “It’s. Nice.”

For now, he refused to completely let go of his hair

“Three things you can hear, Techno.”

Slowly, slowly, his heart stopped pounding in his ears- but he could *hear* that, couldn’t he? “I can hear my heartbeat,” he started, letting the hand that wasn’t in his hair come up to his chest to feel how it skipped one beat and moved on at the same rabbit’s pace it had been going. “I can...I can...hear your breathing.” Wilbur’s was measured. Just loud enough, probably, that he had intended to be heard. For Techno to, perhaps, sync up with it.

He came to a slow stop. Techno tilted his head and closed his eyes, ignoring the nightmares that wanted to play out behind his eyelids, and *listened*.

A soft whistling of a kettle. The tap of Tommy’s shoes on tile, anxious and worried enough that it carried far enough for his enhanced hearing to seek out.

“I can hear the kettle.” He rubbed at his face and found tears waiting. Realized that his voice was hoarse not just from panic but from strangled sobs refusing to completely come out. *Ah.*

“You’re doing so good, Techno. Not much more left, okay?”

No, he wasn’t. He was doing so far from *good*. He was a broken monstrosity and the pieces hadn’t fallen together the way his brothers had wanted it to. There was no mending him with gold to fill in the cracks, and make him more beautiful for it, only the soft shredding of his heart even as he calmed down, as Wilbur took him in with words and slowly let his breathing calm down to something approaching normal.

“Two...two...”

“It’ll be two things that you can smell.”

Now that- that was easy.

“Lavender.” His voice was firm, for once. Sure of what was going on. Lavender was a smell that lingered, tucked into the corners of the room and sprinkled around the place in various bags, in the tea that he liked to drink. His clothes smelled like lavender. His bedsheets smelled like lavender. It wasn’t too sharp but *fuck* if he didn’t identify it with himself so deeply that he wanted to cry, remembering its presence.

But another smell- now, that was hard.

He worried at his lip idly and tried to think- what could he smell, what could he smell? He let his nostrils flare and barely got an answer, nearly let his slowly calming emotions spike to a fever pitch but- ah.

"Wine," he murmured. Thought of the bottle nearby, opened with a glug or two taken out. It was faint, almost completely cloaked by the lavender, but it was there. "Wine."

"And one thing you can taste."

Instantly:

"Blood."

Wilbur lurched forwards, eyes widening. "I- did you bite your lip, your tongue? Did you get hurt? I-"

"No," he mumbled, pressing his back further against the wall until Wilbur gave him more space. "Just...I can taste it. For some reason."

Because of the many he had slaughtered. Because of the many, teens and adults and middle-aged people alike, that he had cut or gored or pushed off a cliff. In some way, shape or form, it danced around him and welcomed him like an old friend, and it disgusted him, nearly mad everything worse, but...for better or worse, it was a constant in his life.

It lingered, lingered, lingered on his tongue.

He could remember that much, at least.

And he was also sort of biting part of the inside of his mouth, now that his hand was releasing from his hair. It was nice and...grounding.

"The tea's ready," Tommy called quietly into the room. A second later, a shadow fell on the wall. Techno couldn't see Tommy, not from the bed blocking him from the doorway, but the shadow told him most of what he needed to know. "I...Techno..."

"I'll give it to him." Wilbur glanced at him. Rose on unsteady feet to grab the mugs from Tommy before he circled back around, placed one mug on the carpet, and slid it forwards.

Techno leaned forward, picked it up and nearly splashed some on himself, but found enough energy within himself to withdraw and bring the mug to his lips. The scalding water- it was normal to him, but in some way- in some way he could feel the oddity of it, the way that he hadn't really had it like that before he had come out of that subworld now, and it nearly sent him into a fit.

He stopped drinking. Let the lavender linger on his tongue. If he was right, Tommy had mixed a bit of honey in with it. *Odd.*

"You said you were remembering," Wilbur said. Prompting. Searching.

Techno let his eyes close and leaned his head back. Tried to breathe in and out and found that it came easier than before, even with the current of half-strained panic running throughout.

Remembering. What a kind way to put realizing how pieces of the life this body had lived were put together. What a *kind* way to call him finding out that all the murdering was

enforced by a number of things. That he had supported a person who his brothers had hated. That the same person had helped him in turn, genuinely nice- a person who then went around and was cruel, cruel to others.

He closed his eyes and tipped his head back until it met the wall. He drained half of the mug with another long sip and just listened to Wilbur's breathing, to Tommy's pacing in the hallway outside.

He wished Phil were there, but- alas.

"Yeah," he said, and it was one of the few things that filled the room, that hopeless little twist to his voice. Bittersweet, almost. "Remembering."

Remembering a stranger. Remembering a life that may have best been kept in the dark, even though he and his family had been impatient in some way to recover them all. He still didn't have all the pieces, had no clue if he ever would, but-

What a thing, losing yourself was. Regaining parts of it back again.

"Do you want to- talk about it?"

Techno opened his eyes and let them focus on the ceiling above him. He felt his own tapestry of life, holes scattered across it without reason, edges torn and fraying, and wondered how it would shift if he so much as said something about what he had weaved back in to Wilbur.

"No," he said faintly, and ignored the way that he sounded like he wasn't entirely *there*, drifting. Ignored the way that he very much felt not real at all now that the panic had begun to fade, his body realizing that things were safe. "No, I don't think I want to."

A brief shock of panic would not stop the steady march of memories.

Rather than focus on his siblings- he had to plan ahead. He had to ready himself for what was to come and try and sort through his feelings at the same time.

First, though, with the heaviness that clouded his eyes and the way that he had to gulp down the rest of his tea as if he would drown without it, limbs growing just as heavy as his eyelids did-

Sleep would be the first step, as exhausted as he was from remembering, from shattering, from being patched momentarily back together by Wilbur and by Tommy's tea-brewing.

The real battle could wait, if only for a few hours.

Chapter End Notes

welcome back to snapshots in lavender where the plot progresses two inches at a time

tune back in next week for a groundbreaking 2.3 inches of progress
happy weed day!

xxxiii. i could use some help getting out of this conversation

Chapter Summary

Drift along in the sea of time. When you look to the heavens, all you see is the void. Techno reaches for what life meant, back in the day, and comes up with nothing.

(Or: He wishes life weren't so complicated.)

Chapter Notes

[chapter title from "beautiful people" by ed sheeran]

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

How much of a portrait of duality could one be?

Techno pondered that as he swirled around a glass of wine, casting his poker face over at every single person gathered in his new apartment. It was an interesting place to pretend at entertaining in, half of the seats deathly uncomfortable and the other half frightfully easy for someone to sink into. To make matters worse- for them- there was no dining table large enough to hold any of them, purely because he was spiteful and hadn't felt like including a dining table in his furniture when getting everything together to make the space just how he wanted it.

"Fuckers say that you're going for a new world record streak on something this year," a voice cut in, smooth and crisp through the chatter that spread through the room. Techno raised his eyebrows at the language as he pivoted and looked at the newcomer.

"I don't think I know you," he said, just as slow as he was when he didn't have a response preplanned. He took a sip of the wine and watched as the stranger raised their own eyebrows in response before tilting their head at him. Yellow-to-blue light glinted off of ram's horns in the color-washed space.

Instantly, his interest was piqued. Hybrids in Hypixel weren't the most *uncommon*, not compared to regular servers, but at this kind of scene- well, he had maybe seen enough of them to maybe get to the latter part of his second set of fingers in these spaces since he had signed a contract. Which said something.

"Hey, no worries," they said, and that smooth voice turned a bit drawling, a bit chummy as the hybrid bared his teeth in a noncombative grin. "Ain't like we're all world-renowned here."

I'm the plus-one for one of the other business shmucks here. Her name was Judy, or somethin', but she just wanted me along for the diversity points, you know?"

Talkative. Curiously talkative in a room where the other people in suits kept glancing their way, but quiet enough that his words wouldn't entirely make it over to them.

Techno glanced away. "The points," he murmured, which was all an acknowledgment of its own before he finally answered the question. "Now that Blitz and Sky Wars have both been swept..." He hummed. "Maybe Bed Wars, even if it's similar to Sky." He sniffed. "May need to handicap myself."

"Say- want to make a deal?" They winked at him when he looked over, cool as a cucumber even with his strange tone. "Everyone knows you're shacked up with Quartz an' all that, but how about helping a great little startup gain some traction?"

"...Talk to my agent."

"No, no- I'm talkin' to *you*. As a friend, you know."

Curious. Curious, curious, curious. The attitude, even with the glaze of business and shop talk that everyone else also approached him with, felt...different. Techno let himself take another swig before he examined the dregs of what was left in the glass. "As a friend," he echoed. Despite himself, he was...*fascinated* by the confidence of this person. "What's your name?"

"A Mr. J. Schlatt, businessman extraordinaire at your service." When he looked over, the ram hybrid was grinning at him. A second later, he could feel a ping at the back of his mind- one request for a contact from someone with that name as an ID. Despite the mild red flags, he accepted it and drained the rest of his glass.

[j.schlatt]: Hey, hybrid to hybrid- we gotta stick up for each other, eh? Someone's gotta rescue you from these dumbasses.

Techno blinked, slow and surprised. He watched the grin on Schlatt's face grow deeper.

"Excuse me," he murmured, "but I have to go make the rounds, now."

[techno]: Talk to me later. You have one chance.

If it was at all possible, he could feel the delight positively *pouring* out of the man even as he turned his back to him.

[j.schlatt]: Wouldn't dream of fuckin' it up, honeybun.

How odd.

(What a buffoon.)

Perhaps, though, there was one person in all of the business and corporate side of things that could possibly have his back.

Even if they were some kind of a head for a desperate startup.

"Techno," Phil said softly, projected on Wilbur's screen for once instead of connecting up directly with his own communicator since it had been implanted, "maybe you should come back home. There's always time to figure out more, okay?"

He stared blankly at the screen. Wilbur and Tommy sat on either side of him by the kitchen's island, sat on somewhat comfortable stools, and the meal in front of him laid uneaten as he tried to wrap his mind around the idea.

If he thought hard enough and got past that barrier in his mind, he could think of Phil saying this another two or three times. Different circumstances, different happenings, still the same words.

In one of them, his own hands had been smaller. He knew that.

But there was a conversation to continue.

"I...I don't think so," he responded, clasping his hands together and letting a thumb retrace comforting circles on the other hand. "I'm fine here."

"No, you're really *not*," Wilbur cut in. Techno glanced over. His brother's eyes were as hard as diamond, his back unbending, his gaze cutting into him as if trying to examine what laid inside. His own expression went mulish and stony in reaction, some of his pink hair falling across his face as he hunched over further. "Are we going to ignore what you've been like, lately? The panic attack, the anxiety, the spacing out- *really*, Techno-"

"Tell me when you're talkin' about somethin' else," he murmured, and leaned forward to let himself get swept away by a hauntingly familiar apathy.

"Techno-"

He closed his eyes.

The next time Techno opened them, he was at the windows provided from the training room, looking down on the city far below in its amalgamation of steel and diverse shapes and ugly obelisks crowned by advertisements. He blinked and looked down, found himself holding a sword. The weight of a bow was heavy despite itself on his back.

There was only a deep well of confusion inside of him. He didn't know what he had to do, why he had arrived here, why the swords was in his hands or the bow and its quiver were on his back.

He turned instinctively to his side- and found a training dummy there, hacked up even with its sturdiness.

Techno had done that. Recently. It was obvious.

When he closed and opened his eyes again, he was sitting on the floor of his room, notebooks arrayed out in front of him and one in his lap. Upon closer inspection, the one he held was more of a diary than anything else- a list of notes, important happenings, doodles that he had been too busy to put in anything else.

Techno tilted his head to look at them before he found himself eating dinner with his brothers, the two of them speaking to him as if nothing odd was going on.

Or perhaps treating this as their new normal.

"So," Tommy was saying, "I'm not a big fan of Blitz, personally."

"Ooh- Techno started out with that, not sure if you want to say any more, Tommy, look at him, he's *piiiissed*-"

And as if someone else was puppeteering him, he gave a thin smile, devoid of too much emotion except a layer of mild amusement. "It's a bit old," he hummed, words slurring but legible enough that he could watch Tommy brighten and Wilbur roll his eyes at any response at all. "I was really into it, but. Of course I'd move on."

"See, I told you, you're just old, Wilbur, *gods*-"

He kept *remembering*. He'd blink and remember something and the next time he opened his eyes he would be stared at or find himself in the middle of doing something or find that everything was normal but he didn't know what was going on.

Techno found that he didn't exactly care about that fact.

Remembering was strange.

Time was strange.

After the panic attack, the world seemed to be at a distance- he was watching himself do things, almost, distanced like before as his body made movements and his mouth spouted off

words- but there was something incredibly wrong about it all.

He couldn't be bothered to pay too much attention to it.

He was drowning in the pit he had dug himself and he had accepted the fact. Techno almost welcomed it- the Blood God could be killed. The Blade could be dulled. There was information cramming his head that he had to sort out, and it was fine to leave himself on autopilot as he did it all, seeing the world in its overdone lavender tones and finding himself unable to be pulled up from the deep.

Detached, he could examine himself further and find himself, of course, wanting.

Like always.

(Tek-no. Child-unwanted. Of course. *Of course.*)

Techno stared down at a page filled with neatly typed words and felt almost as if there was a scream trying to tear itself out of his throat. It was a moment- just a moment- before he stamped it down, looked up at the person behind the desk, and kept his damned poker face on.

"It'll be done on the next set of Sky Wars," they said, nodding down towards the sheet of paper. He didn't need to read it again to know what it said- they wanted him to do something artistic. Something daring that nobody had done before, and they already had some kind of a start to that vision.

It was open-ended. Of course it was. But they decided what he would do. They decided which of the many companies they stood as the parent of or were associated with would be his partner that time.

He still had to eat the rest of the Techno-branded ramen that sat at the bottom of his cupboard. He was too prideful to throw it away- food was made to be eaten. The other Techno-branded food products in his hold didn't exactly help.

"Next Sky Wars," he echoed, nice and rote as was expected of him, and nodded at them. Felt the blood already on his hands, washed away and invisible with time, thicken in his mind's eye.

He would always be a killer. They always wanted him to *kill*, always wanted him to strive for something, whether it was a better killcount or an artsy way of showing his utter dominance over the others and achieving that end goal.

Out of everything, Techno was just tired of the damn *games* they wanted him to do.

“Any chance,” he murmured, “I could do this somewhere else? Bed Wars? Survival Games? Blitz, even? Anything?” Never aggressive in tone. They didn’t like that outside of the battles. There was an art in being horrifying enough to be called the Blood God in battle while being a demure and unassuming enough figure in front of his agent and Quartz itself to be... overlooked.

“Survival Games could be interesting,” they said, and he could see the gears turning in the businessperson’s head. Could see the way that they considered it in how they idly clicked the end of their pen and eyed him.

“Maybe another time,” it was concluded, and he bit back a sigh and instead nodded. Let himself stand up and turn and say a proper goodbye before he left, off to train and theorize what he could do that would meet ever-increasing standards.

It’s just not enough to be the best anymore.

Of course it wasn’t.

He would figure it out. He always did. Besides- eventually he’d be free. There were loopholes that he could jump through when his workload was just light enough to excuse it. He could cut ties. He could run.

After all, there was even somewhere to go- according to Simon, at least, there was a whole new subserver about to appear in the next half year.

He was looking forward to it.

Techno jolted, giving a full-body flinch when someone touched his arm. He whipped his head around to see Tommy, crouching down and backlit by cyan and gentle yellow, who stared down at him with wide eyes.

“Techno,” Tommy said, quiet and almost as if he were soothing a scared animal, “what are you doing?”

He tilted his head at his younger brother. The *I don’t know* was an easy option, but it didn’t feel right to say it instantly. Instead, he surveyed the scene that he found himself increasingly aware of.

Oh.

That was why Tommy seemed concerned. He had thought it was concern over how he looked, but the blades laid out neatly around him on the floor spelled an interesting picture. Closest to him was a plastic box, grindstones, a thing to polish the blades- and the majority of the blades arrayed had been cleaned to a near mirror finish.

Instead of the truthful response, Techno stalled with a hum. Then:

“What time is it?”

The communicator slipped his mind. Instead of saying so after he remembered it, though, instead of checking and calling it off- Techno patiently waited for a response, even as Tommy’s expression seemed to run through a gauntlet. Surprise, anger, shock, resignation, worry- it was almost as if there was a film playing out on his face. Fascinating, even through the lowered fog.

“...Four thirty-seven in the morning,” Tommy responded, and it was then that Techno could finally appreciate the way that his little brother (or was he, no, he couldn’t question that, it was finally a softened moment-) was being quiet- a rarity. A pleasure. Techno let his head tilt just a little bit more and let his silence stall once more for him, refusing to properly answer that very first question.

They stayed there, Techno sitting cross-legged and Tommy crouching, for a long moment. When it stretched on too long, Techno pulled a grindstone closer to him and one of the unsharpened, unpolished blades. Let himself begin the process of sharpening it further- this one a knife, just a bit larger than the ones that laid in the kitchen.

“Techno-“

“I think I’m sharpening some blades,” Techno said lightly, airily, and sighed softly as he paused before continuing on. The sound wasn’t exactly *loud*, but it wasn’t quiet- it was quiet enough, though, that it wasn’t heard throughout the house. Perhaps that was why Tommy hadn’t noticed until now.

“You *think* you are.” Ah. Tommy didn’t want to play any games.

“I think I am,” He confirmed, absolutely unbothered by it all, and let himself untether again from the world, barely responding to anything from his brother. If it was so important, he could start yelling and screaming about it.

Maybe, just maybe, Techno would hear him above the din of his own personal storm.

As he sharpened blades in one reality:

“I’m being here for a little more,” he informed Phil in stilted, hard-to-say words, sitting back on the bed of the little hotel room he had been given. It was cramped, according to the person that had guided him there, but it was more than spacious enough for him- he tried a smile and found Phil smiling back from where his communicator (*his very own*, which was fascinating, especially since Wilbur had always coveted his own and barely let Techno use it but now he

was on his own for a few days and Phil wanted to keep in touch and he had a function-limited model of his own and how cool was *that* and-) sat, perched on the bedframe.

“Oh- you got into the next round? How’s it going?”

“I got to next round,” he confirmed, nodding and letting his ears flick a little, eyes smiling where his mouth only did so much. It was impressive- a kid in his first big multi-day tournament, well, wasn’t that a dream come true, even if the kid appeared closer to a young teen to anyone else watching?

Although.

“Sort of want home,” he murmured, letting one hand reach the back of his neck and scratch just a little in his sheepishness. *You’re not here. Wilbur’s not here.* “Want to sleep home, not here.”

“I get it,” Phil laughed, leaning forwards for the little camera there. In the background, he could hear the strums of a guitar- of course Wilbur was still practicing. Of course. “I’m proud of you, Techno, you know that? I never bothered going onto any of the tournaments, and Wilbur never even got close to ‘em. And you’re just a kid, y’know?”

Techno snorted and rolled his eyes. “*You’re* still kid,” he pointed out, and watched Phil splutter in turn.

“Excuse you- I may be, what, twenty or something like that, but that doesn’t mean I’m still a kid! You’re only, what, nine? Ten? We never even figured out your age!”

“Nine,” he said with a firm nod. That- was a number that he figured was close enough to whatever Phil wanted. He was a bit tall, sure, compared to other kids that were said to be nine years old, but he figured that was just...the hybrid status speaking. Whatever a hybrid actually *was*.

“Ah, whatever, whatever, nine, ten, still in a good age bracket-“ What did that collection of words even *mean*- “you’re having fun, though, right?”

Techno...bit at his lip.

“...What’s the matter, Tech?”

“...Don’t like killing,” he murmured, an echo of what he had said before, those first few times when Phil had brought him there, let him run about and fight.

But fighting was just what he knew.

“Do you want to- not do it? You can drop out, you know.”

“No, no, I.” He snorted, this time more in frustration than in excitement or any kind of happiness. It was annoyance, plain and simple, because he didn’t have the words for it. It- it was too complicated. He could explain it in a rough piglin-touched tongue, could go over it in

detail even though the finest words still escaped him in either language- but he could at least describe it in the most basic way in the words Phil understood. “Fighting. I like fighting.”

“But not killing.”

“Not killing,” he agreed.

“... You sure you want to stay in?”

“Sure.”

“...Techno.”

“Good-night,” he said abruptly, said firmly, and ended the call with a decisive nod. Even when Phil rung again, he didn’t pick up. He just flicked an ear and turned all calls silent.

After all, he had agreed with some of the people in suits that he’d continue on, and he wanted to at least see what would happen next. He kept his promises.

He slept well, that night.

(At least someone did.)

Chapter End Notes

i lied it was 1 inch of plot. also these roman numerals are getting too long i Regret

i hope everyone's doing well! ive been doing a lot lately....and there's still so much more
i need to do for so many parts of my life....

but we all gucci, eyyyyyy

if any of yall like the murderbot diaries A NEW NOVELLA CAME OUT TODAY
AND IT'S SO GOOD

but if yall dont....GO CHECK OUT THE MURDERBOT DIARIES IT'S VERY
FUNNY AND AMAZING

have a lovely daaaaaaaaaaaay i swear itll be 2.3 inches of progress NEXT week

xxxiv. the price of this so-called perfection is everything

Chapter Summary

Techno opens his eyes. Phil watches from afar. His siblings try to persevere under their own stresses.

(Or: When you're trying to stay beneath the water, the surface is a beast that arrives quicker than you wish it would.)

Chapter Notes

[chapter title from "one" by sleeping at last]

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“You should come home,” Phil said plainly one day. Laid it all out in the open.

Techno let his eyes drift back to the communicator that Tommy held out in front of him, the arm shaking lightly from being extended for so long. He saw the way his brother’s eyes widened, even if he didn’t entirely understand the reason why. Perhaps it was because of whatever reason he had been looking away.

(Perhaps it had been because he hadn’t paid attention to anything for the past two hours and finally, finally was showing some kind of a reaction to something. To anything.)

Phil’s eyes widened at the contact. Techno blinked long and slow, thinking about whatever he’d say with the mindfulness of someone who had to carefully choose their words.

“...No,” he said after a moment of deliberation.

“Why? You’ve remembered a lot, you can do more later, you can- Techno- no, Techno, please, don’t, we-“

Techno snorted softly, let himself zone out again, and went back to where his mind was working on piecing together his earlier memories of Hypixel. They didn’t seem happy at that, but, well. What could they do about it?

“Tommy, I know he’s been doing this but how often has it been, what the fuck-“

He delved deeper. He dove into his inner workings constantly, uncaring of the scene he had made days prior, of panting over Wilbur’s still form and being talked down from a panic

attack. He was a treasure hunter in dangerous waters.

Foreign waters, almost, with a hint of familiarity.

Techno's memories were there, at the very least, a few popping up with every search as he went in and around things he had already remembered.

"I don't know! I don't fucking know, Phil! Ask Wil! We can't get him to do anything he doesn't want to do, he won't even let us drag him around-"

But they also seemed like another person's thoughts. Another person's memories.

But they was his, even if they didn't seem like it. This was a person who had grown used to the minutiae of daily life at Hypixel. Wake up, go do the bloodsport, do publicity, go back home. Training in-between. Organized events whenever was possible.

A person chained to something that they grew increasingly frustrated with.

Techno continued to dive, and only came up for air when it was strictly required.

He didn't like seeing his sibling's faces when he could understand the world around him. Or, rather, couldn't- because nothing had made since since, well. Before coming to Hypixel. Even then.

"I will ask him, then!"

"Fine!"

"Fine!"

Everything was easier to deal with in the past, even if he was just repressing the emotional backlash.

"Any chance you'll be able to drop by soon?" In his mind's eye Techno could see Phil peeling a few potatoes, dicing them up before he dropped them in next to some carrots in a bowl. Techno let himself run through a sword technique before he responded, subvocalizing with the communicator in his pocket trying to burn a hole through his pants.

Not actually, but. It was heavy on his mind, even with the idle tune he hummed when he wasn't transmitting something.

"Maybe," he subvocalized, quickly sorting through all of his responsibilities with worry panging in his chest. He spun around, lunged forwards, stopped with the tip of the sword at a training dummy's throat, and whirled back away.

He had a meeting late in the evening to discuss a photoshoot taking place a month from now- about the photographer, about what it'd be, a scheduling meeting tomorrow and a different photoshoot the day after. He had training to complete and a short few duels on Blitz to go to because his sponsors wanted him to give a short burst of energy to the currently fading sport.

He had lunch with a sponsor the next day. Had a branding meeting afterwards. A lesson to give one of the other groups of personnel under Quartz and Sinea's hold on axe techniques before he had to go home and train even harder.

His schedule was packed- meetings, photoshoots, battles, tournaments, fighting. It...he...

But he had to fit his family in. He *had to*.

Maybe he could replace training with training with Tommy. He had been asking for lessons lately, hadn't he? Hadn't he commented on the latest tournament that had been live and broadcasted far and wide, had asked for a pointer on the way he had cut down those last two people?

Yeah. Maybe-

"Maybe on Thursday," he said mildly, slotting in with his mind to replace the latter half of the day and the whole of the night with him going home. A smaller meeting could be moved. There were no battles that night, anyways. "I just wish I wasn't so busy."

"Busy with success," Phil laughed, and he could just feel the wink sent across. He snorted and rolled his eyes and went along with it. "That's my brother- always making waves. I'll have you know, though, these carrots I got from one of the folks on the server we used to be on- gods, it's still worth heading back to grab some from them."

"I'm sure," he responded, mild and agreeable as milk. He went through the motions. Spun once, twice, thrice, swordplay less important than the utter control he had over his body.

He had a match to get to in twenty minutes.

...Eh, it didn't matter. It was fine.

He could talk to Phil as he got ready and make it before he was supposed to be in his little waiting room, all nice and ready and not-sweating and free to let loose on the field.

Even as he set himself free in battle, Techno was more chained than ever.

"I can't come over," he half-heard, faint and angry, and he stopped before rounding the corner that would make him fully visible from the living room. Techno stopped and waited and listened, feeling the most in control that he had been in- in-

He didn't know how long it had been.

A quick check of the communicator, and-

"It's been two weeks since that fucking *incident*," he could hear Wilbur's voice hiss, "and it hasn't gotten any *better*, Phil. What the fuck can we do? He refuses to leave the house unless it's to wander the fucking city. He does all this shit in the house and he barely talks and gods, Phil, he's not even there most of the time. That's not my brother."

"You know what situation I'm in," Phil said angrily, darkly. "I can't just up and fucking *leave here*, Wil. I'm not having the world try and crumble in and not have a home for any of you three to come back to! I'm trying to do the best I can but he won't even answer any of my damned calls!"

Two weeks, Wilbur had said. He pinged his own communicator on instinct and got a date that was- was-

Yeah. It was two weeks since rising with the knowledge that Teach was- he refused to think too much about it.

The problem:

Techno was losing all sense of time yet again. And hadn't realized it before because of... apathy. And a lack of clarity. And...and...

Wait- he was losing all sense of self again.

Fuck.

Almost as if they were an afterthought, all the pings and alerts of missed calls and the cadence of messages gone unanswered rung merrily at the back of his mind.

Was he forgetting things again?

"You can do better, Phil, for fuck's sake! I've even been trying to shake him to get him to respond, okay? He'll let me move him. He'll let me stop him. But he barely fucking responds and when he does, I- it's such a lackluster response! Gods!"

Of course they worried. Of course. He could barely remember forgetting in the first place, but it reminded him of the haze he was deep enough in to start forgetting to breathe. It reminded him of days that he, funny enough, barely remembered, even if it was because of routine and farming instead of not paying attention to his body and instead being swept away by that ever-raging current of the past.

The past that had crept up on him until it had a stranglehold around his entire self, every bit that made Techno- every bit that made Techno himself.

He had climbed up through Hypixel. Had gotten himself contracted, had forgotten to tell Phil most of the details, had forgotten to tell anyone much of anything even while he had gone through it for real.

He had become a monster out of necessity in the Nether. Had let himself be led, a rabbit chasing a golden carrot on a stick, into tangles that he hadn't been able to get out of for years in Hypixel. Into situations that made his skin crawl- social interaction, many photos, objectification, unable to surface from the legalese that aimed to coat his hands in blood and carefully applied makeup to accentuate it.

A tamed piglin hybrid. One that will participate in bloodbaths but will come to the lap of its master when they beckon.

What a thought. It made him sick.

At least something made him feel a strong emotion, though, other than an absolutely horrid sense of just...a void.

"Wil. Wil, I don't know what you want me to do that I can actually act on. Wil I- I can't fix everything as easily as I could when we were all younger. This isn't getting into a fight after you played guitar, okay? This isn't one person taking some of the other's food. It isn't even just a petty argument. Wil. You can't expect me to just- *magic* it all the fuck away!"

Of course he had been able to go back to his family when Quartz allowed it, so, so often at the start. Of course. But he had continued to let his hands get soaked. Had continued to collect scars and have the audacity to not die and get drawn further in by the company's greedy hands and greedier contracts. He had been a monster cloaked in armor one second and beautiful finery the next, and every server influenced by Hypixel had been able to watch him grow from what was a child into a teenager, into an adult with an ethereal beauty crafted by either makeup and editing or blood and the dance of battle.

(He wondered how many people had looked at him too closely when he was at his start. What Sinea and Quartz had thought of him. What adults thought it was okay to coerce a minor into a contract, acting as if being a hybrid made signing legally binding documents *okay as a kid* —)

"*Why?* Why can't you, Phil?"

And he had met Dream. And Dream had pulled him out of it for a time with something that he could process well outside of just meetings and fighting and murdering. For once, he had been able to fully clear up his life. Or, well, as much as you could when you were still in a web of a contract, a bramble that couldn't be untangled without fighting it tooth and claw. He could breathe. He could sew. He could make gifts for his family without their exact knowledge and he could throw himself into something of creation.

And then, after everything, he had been able to escape. Somehow.

Perhaps, deeper in his mind, was the memory of something he had over Quartz. Or a loophole that he had found.

Or an utterly uncaring look in the face of nearly unchecked entertainment industries.

He had cut all ties with Quartz. He had announced to the world that he was going into retirement and there was absolutely *nothing* they could do about it, no matter how his reputation had been going high enough to spread even further out, so many spheres beyond Hypixel's influence that it'd reach the bulk of the existing world. No matter how everyone kept saying there was no limit to where his peak would end until he was the king of all challenges.

And then he had- he had-

Well. Of course, so many things were still fuzzy.

"I'm not an admin, not really, and we both know that, Wil. I can't just spirit him away. And I'm not the expert on everything in existence. He...I...I'm not some kind of a god, either. Really. I just got a private server license and a bit of training so I didn't mess it up, okay? Private servers are fragile, Wilbur, and-"

The facts:

He had started exploring a new subworld of islands hung artfully in a void of sky, so many other mini-worlds and servers encapsulated inside of it. He had fought monsters, delighted in the way that they were constructs, delighted in the way that they provided a challenge but didn't cover him in gore when they were finally defeated.

Relished in the way that nothing was truly realistic. The skeletons didn't have cores, only an amount of damage it'd take before dissolving. Spiders didn't cover you in guts and bits of their bodies, they only turned into little compilable items.

Techno had found something he wanted to pursue: getting upgrades.

He had gotten lost along the way and started a war with one of the other people farming potatoes out there in pursuit of a number one slot on a meaningless leaderboard in a setting that many in Hypixel still saw as a failing project.

Somehow, it had spiraled out of control.

And he won.

At some point vaguely afterwards, presumably his communicator had broke. (At least that was what he thought he had heard someone tell him so, so soon after Phil had first taken him off of the island.)

And then his world as he knew it, however he had seen it back then, had gotten wiped away.

(Of course. The past him had never really been allowed nice things. And that itself had set the stage for where he was now.)

"Phil. Phil, I can't keep watching him just *walk around* and-"

"Do you think I can stand to hear about it either? Do you think I can stand to be on the other end and watch him sit there? Do you think I feel good being *helpless*, Wilbur, while you can

actually at least *reach out to him?*"

How could he reconcile everything he felt? How could he merge the parts of him so that he became something closer to whole rather than stretching himself thinner and thinner with every book in his mental library that regained their words, enough to spill off of the pages and onto the floor? How could he be a killer, a creator, a farmer, a brother, an embroidery artist and more all at once?

Techno had won the potato war and it had cost him everything.

He had thrown himself into another aspect of creation and had his whole sense of self robbed from him because of it. Because of a fucking mistake.

(Because of an intentional error, another part of him whispered. He stamped that part of himself down and tried not to clench his fists too hard. Conspiracy theories never helped.)

People- regular people, and even admins- weren't meant to handle the mental strain caused by a server or sub-server in stasis. It was a mental strain that cost Techno dearly to this day, the mistaken self-meddling of the subserver snapping in on him like a faulty rubber band.

He knew that, to some extent.

Techno knew that the amnesia wasn't like those found in books, not exactly. He knew it wasn't supposed to try and rip his head open with new discoveries. He knew that remembering for other people didn't steal their bodily functions from them, didn't give them new quirks like scrubbing their hands until they nearly bled, didn't make them drift until there was almost nothing that could bring them back from the brink.

"...Phil," Wilbur said, voice dropped down to a low, broken whisper, "I don't know what to do. If...if only we had realized sooner- if only I wasn't so fucking busy on that server with Dream and Tommy and, and..."

And his brothers suffered because of it.

His brothers were tearing apart at the seams almost like he was, and the force of his grief at that fact nearly spilled out of him right then and there without abandon.

Techno was losing a battle against himself to figure out who he truly was, and nobody was walking out of it a winner. Not him. Not the peanut gallery, made up of those he called family and tried to keep close.

He had just wanted to *farm*.

He closed his eyes, mourning for it all in a faint, transparent way, and opened his eyes to see Wilbur wide-eyed in front of him, communicator clutched in one hand.

"Techno- *Techno*, is everything alright-"

It was only then that he noticed the low keening that had been leaving him, only then noticed that he had audibly voiced his feelings as his hands wrung each other and tried to keep a hold

on himself. He blinked just a bit, that clarity still draped over him like a blanket, and let a hand reach up to touch his own throat.

Slowly lowered it a second later as the keening petered out.

What was his problem, truly, at the root of it all?

...Perhaps, in one way, it had been the reason he had gone to the subworld to begin with. The fame, the sponsors, the contracts and the blood and the killing.

Perhaps, in another, it was just how he was at conflict with himself.

"No," he breathed, and watched as Wilbur's eyes widened another fraction, as his brother reached out with a hand to rest on one of his shoulders. Faintly, he realized that he had his cloak on. Perhaps that was the thing that was truly dear to him in the middle of the storm. "No, Wilbur. I can't figure out who I'm meant to *be*," he whined, voice breaking in the middle of it. "I can't- I can't- I just wanted to *rest*—"

And that was the issue, he supposed.

He had just wanted to rest from anything so stressful as a bloodsport, and then he had been swept away by a simple mistake.

Before that, he had been escaping from an environment which still felt foreign to him. The fighting, at least, was familiar. Even if it wasn't life or death.

And now all of *this* had happened, and the hybrid was even more broken than he had been during his time in the server previously.

"I just wanted to rest," he echoed miserably, and fell into Wilbur like a man who had just decided that the closest person to them would be a suitable pillow.

For his credit, Wilbur took it in stride- maneuvered him to the living room, shifted him so that he was drowning in a soft couch instead.

"Rest now, at least," Phil advised from Wilbur's hand, not unkindly. He sounded exhausted. Worried. Techno wanted to cry just at the wavering that Phil seemed to be trying to hide in his voice. "...I just hope you're this aware tomorrow," he murmured under his breath, and Techno pretended like he didn't hear that.

Whatever was next, though, was lost to him- it took so much energy to be aware. So much.

Through that grief descending back into nothingness, Techno didn't come back to in terms of clarity again for another- another day.

(It was getting closer together. It was getting closer together, and soon, soon- soon he'd be forced back into what he didn't want to face.

Time was ticking.

He could see the surface.

Why was he so *scared* of it, even if faintly?)

Techno sat in his room, an embroidery hoop in his grip as he slowly went through the motions, let the needle pass through the fabric on one side, then the other. One side, then the other. His body ran itself- a well-oiled machine in some aspects, it stitched a very simple combination of runes on a square of fabric- a handkerchief, if he was bothered to realize what he had grabbed at first.

It didn't particularly bother him- mostly because he was busy trying to sort out little bits of himself, trying to grapple with his thoughts the last time everything had been crystal clear.

He was plunged back into the cold water of reality from that just-lucid trance, more aware than ever of the shift in his perception, when a shrill voice pierced through his hearing.

“Techno, dinner is...Techno? Techno? Holy shit, is that *embroidery*, what the fuck, holy shit, wait, *Techno*-“

Techno allowed himself one slow blink to gain his bearings. He looked down- white thread, beige handkerchief, a line of runes that he was...pretty sure amounted to good health and cleanliness, and one high-pitched voice belonging to one younger brother behind him.

“Well,” he said out loud, setting the hoop to the side as Tommy loomed behind him, “it seems the jig is up.”

“Techno- you’re-“

“Before you say anything about me talking back to you,” he said flatly, “please let us agree to discuss this again when I can hold a longer conversation. Preferably when I am. Not spacing out all the time.” He was glad that he had put the hoop down, because his hand was balled into a fist on the floor, trembling with the strength of how he had his muscles tensed.

A piece of advice he had been given, once upon a time: *People hunt thread enchanters like us, Techno. Even telling family isn’t safe. They can tell others so, so easily.* A wry smile in a voice. *Friends. Family. Loved ones. Anyone.*

“Speaking of which. I will just. Go now.”

“You fucker, you can’t get away with-“

Oh yes he could.

He closed his eyes and sank back into the depths, switching from riding a clarified almost-panic to sinking in apathy for the moment with the prospect of...well. Of having to talk about

thread enchantments. Embroidery enchantments. Things he didn't know if he'd have all the details on when he came back to it, answers that Tommy and Wilbur would want that he just wouldn't be able to give them.

Techno let it all just fade away.

After all, the surface was feeling closer than ever before.

There was only so long he could stay so submerged.

Chapter End Notes

THIS IS LIKE FOUR INCHES POGCHAMPION?????????????

as weekly updates...i think i should- key word should- be able to properly keep up for a little bit longer. i am actively working on new chapters but i try to always have a chapter buffer that i'm comfortable with. i don't want to really stop updating again. thank you all for being so patient with weekly updates instead of every x days, you know?

fun fact: the first draft for this fic was about 62k words long.

i'm glad that people like this. it was originally just...a personal project, i guess. i never intended it to be, like...big? i don't know? it's not terribly plot or intrigue focused like a lot of other stuff i hear about. it's a meandering path where not much really gets done and it's not made with the intent to be what fits a super compelling story format. it's just a quiet labor of love, i guess, even if it's not completely for me at this point. i just want to write something that pleases me, i guess.

thanks for tagging along. it means a lot to me, really.

xxxv. full disclosure, i am a monster

Chapter Summary

Once he surfaces from the depths, the path forward is clearer than before. Techno breathes in fresh air. Phil gives lessons on flowers and color.

(Or: Think of all the things you need to talk about and take out all of the things that make it actually matter. Try your best and fail anyways.)

Chapter Notes

[chapter title from "community gardens" by the scary jokes ft. louie zong]

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Remembering was strange. He knew that.

It didn't exactly prepare him for being vaguely aware of what went on. He couldn't surface himself at will, so he knew that he was on calls with Phil, humming along at the uppermost levels of interaction- frightfully nonresponsive in the views of everyone else. He knew that he was practicing forms in the training room that were too sloppy to be him at a top level, but too smooth to be him in the right frame of mind, and he simply coasted among the thinnest levels of existence.

It didn't exactly prepare him for the way that he viewed the crumbling of those he cared for from a distance. It didn't prepare him for the way that, in some aspect, he knew Tommy flinched away from major touch when he was like that. He knew that Wilbur's lip trembled in the way that meant he would cry later when he made an off-hand joke and Techno didn't so much as twitch, even when he was staring directly at his brother.

It didn't exactly prepare him for the realization that, a week after the conversation Wilbur and Phil had gone through, he felt as if he had truly surfaced- and there was still so much that *wasn't* there, even though there was so much that *was*.

He still wasn't *whole*.

It was a sobering realization. It was something that made him pause for a long, long moment- because...well.

What if he never fully found himself, no matter how much time passed and he kept delving deeper?

What did he do then?

Was it just a matter of picking himself back up and moving on? Did he have to grapple with this version of himself and come out of it with whatever had happened? At what point did... well. At what point did he settle on who he really was and roll with the punches in a more long-term way?

How could he make peace with himself?

...Well. Techno knew what to do first, at least, with both Wilbur and Tommy out of the house, it seemed (and with the waypoint access outside frozen to anyone else, on a cursory check). He was left to his own devices. He did what he always did when he grappled with that kind of issue-

He called Phil.

“...Techno? Techno, you there?”

“Hey, Phil,” he said quietly, too tired to bother with proper subvocalization when the communicator would pick it up anyways if he wanted it. He sat by the windows in his room, chair dragged from the desk just so he could look out and not have to be on his bed or on the floor or in another room, and he took a long, slow sip of fridge-chilled lavender tea. “I...”

“You- you called me. Is everything alright?”

Techno ruminated on that. He let the liquid in the mug swirl around. He watched its rippling still before he sipped at it again and sighed to let Phil know he was still there.

They sat like that for a time. Neither of them had any sort of video projecting on. Just sound.

It was- nice. He could hear Phil’s breathing.

“I don’t know what I expected to find, here,” he finally said, brutally honest and present in a way that hurt in all of his most fragile threads of being. Techno...couldn’t go through this conversation quickly. It was something that he had to puzzle through as he went, a picture that he doubted he’d ever get the full scale of.

He had to make his peace with that.

Phil let him continue. Small mercies.

“I don’t know what I expected to find,” he repeated, tracing the rim of the mug with an idle finger. “Maybe I thought I’d be- happier, figuring out things that happened.” The tea wasn’t scalding his throat as it went down, instead shocking him with an unexpected coolness from the fridge. He was still trying to decide if, perhaps, things were better that way. Running cold instead of hot. Slow instead of fast. “Do you- do you remember that talk we had? Out on the docks that day?”

Phil hummed. Without too much else as background noise, he could imagine that Phil was sitting somewhere or laying down, giving the conversation his full attention. Invested. He didn't know how he felt about that. "About fighting? Killing? Violence? The one during the storm, mate?"

"...Yeah. The one during the storm. Not...any other talk there with us that I...that I remember, uh, fully, at least."

There had been other talks out there, in his memories. Little Techno. Teenager Techno. The Techno of today. It was isolated, it was calm, it was serene- even when the dock was in a different form on their original server, smaller and a bit more rickety, creaking on some of its boards but sturdy enough to hold him, Phil, and Wilbur without trouble.

But...those weighed less on his mind. Even with remembering, the details weren't as clear in his mind, all fuzzy and incapable of being recalled with any clarity.

"What about it, Techno?"

A question answered with another question: "What," he murmured, "did I ever...ever talk to you about Hypixel? About sponsors? About being...famous?"

"They don't exactly seem like related questions, the docks and Hypixel," Phil mumbled, but he was thankfully humored. "Small stuff at first. I mean, you got brand deals and all that... lots of tournament publicity...but everyone else had that kind of stuff, I'm pretty sure? Why?"

Techno closed his eyes and gave himself a second to mourn before he collected all the pieces he knew about the situation.

"Phil."

"Techno."

"After I won my first tournament," he whispered, searching for the threads of memory that still laid there if he actually looked, "I'm pretty sure that I was signed into a contract that lasted until I found enough- enough loopholes to leave and go to that subserver." A pause. "If I. If I remember correctly. Which I'm. Pretty sure I do."

"Oh, mate," Phil whispered, the kind of horrified note that knew the next thing it encountered was nothing good, "what- what kind of a contract?"

What words were there to describe something he could still barely comprehend? What words could be used to fully wrap around what he knew of something that had stolen him so thoroughly? What words could be used to describe the helplessness he felt when, by the time he truly realized how the contract worked, he had already been irrevocably tangled in that cursed bramble patch years in the making? To describe the knowledge that he had to get out, no matter how many bridges he had to burn in the process and how much time he had to look for loopholes to leave?

Did he even realize how the contract had worked *now*, besides how it made him feel? Besides the endless cycle they had stuck him in?

“The kind that- that...” Techno listlessly tipped his head to the side and watched as a light-filled billboard looped in on its own advertisements again. “The kind that takes over your life,” he said, “and end up with you in a fancy apartment where you barely go see your family because your schedule is almost completely filled with things others want you to do.”

Silence. He could imagine Phil closing his eyes at that- but for whatever reason, he couldn’t figure out why.

“I killed for them,” he murmured. “That’s- that’s the context.” And once it started to spill, well, the rest all came out with him, words tumbling over themselves and tusks mushing words together but- but Phil could understand it. Phil had to understand it.

He had to.

“I killed for them and I was- I was a child. And I wasn’t a fan of it to start with but that was what I was supposed to do and it made them happy. And it made you happy. And I didn’t want to be popular and I didn’t want to go to banquets and talked to people and all I wanted to do was go *home*, I think, but they didn’t *let* me and so I stayed there and it kept happening and eventually I just had to escape and because I left I ended up destroying my memories and so much still isn’t there and *I don’t like the context of it at all, Phil!*”

He wasn’t loud, but he was on a roll. His voice was intense, even if a bit hoarse from his few weeks of barely speaking. Of being cast adrift from the world of reality.

“I did whatever they said,” he choked out, some part of him breaking with every word he spoke, “and I don’t entirely know why. Well. Maybe. But that requires thinking. But I keep thinking of, of the way that I cut people down. Of how that was what I- I was and not all the reasons why. *I never died*, Phil, and all of the scars on me, I’m a monster, Phil, of course I became a farmer why would I want to be a killer again and *again* and-“

“Techno.”

He shut up.

“Techno,” Phil said, voice softer than the unbending steel he had cut Techno off with, “I...if I had known about it back then- they’d be facing hell from me. They’d be facing my wrath and if I were able to go over there I’d make their lives a living hell, okay? You...you shouldn’t’ve had to do that, Techno.”

“They clean the battles up for the cameras,” he whispered. “But I- I remember what actually happened. I remember them so well, Phil, why is that what I remember the most?”

“...Stronger, worse memories do that,” Phil said, and he could just *taste* the knowing nature of his brother’s voice, all bitter and tangy. The iron of blood. “The bad ones. The nasty ones. But that doesn’t make you a monster, Techno, just because you didn’t crumple under the

weight and...and break." He sighed- and there was something that scared Techno in that sigh, too.

Phil, in his own way, sounded like he was shattering a little under the conversation just like Techno was.

Phil wasn't meant to shatter.

"I should have known," Phil mumbled. "I-*fuck*, Techno. They didn't call you the Blood God for no reason. The Blade. *Fuck*, mate."

"And," he said, unable to keep it from coming out from where he sat, "and there were people I knew while I was here, people I knew and they were friends but I haven't talked with them since disappearing and I don't know if they're even friends now, I don't know how I feel about them, I'm just- I- there's too much, and some of them *still message me*—"

He cut himself off with a dry sob. Barely any tears. Only exhaustion. Only clarity earned by grueling repetition.

"Techno. Mate. You're not at fault here," Phil stressed. "*You. Didn't. Know.* Not about the company. Not about so many things. Not about this. You were a kid, and then you were a dumb teen just like every other teen, and then you became an adult and lost your memory months ago, okay? It's not you."

"I just don't know *why* I did any of it to begin with," he whispered.

There were things he'd never tell Phil. Would never tell anyone, even though he remembered some of it. He'd never detail to Phil the way in which he made a deal with someone to get his older brother priority queue on private server training and licensing. Would never tell him exactly the way in which he wanted to shrink when people looked at him after a fight, horrified and in awe. Would never utter a word about any of Quartz's personnel talking about him being a hybrid- or even when a random person discussed it, even the admins, even his fellow competitors side-eyeing him in any public rooms.

He had worked to get his brothers all priority status on the whole server, he remembered faintly, knew that if he remembered how to check that he'd see a [VIP+++] next to their status in the server administration files. But he had done it through fighting. He had won it all through blood and promises and a young teen's idealistic wishes.

We'll do this for you, they had said, *if you become the monster we already see in you for the public. Let yourself become untethered. Go until you're coated in wonderful red.*

And he wondered why he sometimes obsessively washed his hands. Hah.

"Why," Techno asked, "did I- did I- fight? Why couldn't've I have farmed earlier? Done-done more with my life?"

Phil didn't deserve to get asked that question. He deserved to be asked nicer things like when they'd have dinner, what it'd be, if he had caught any fish that day. He didn't deserve to hold

the weight of Techno's world on his shoulders. Shouldn't have to worry about the burden that the hybrid was, even if they both loved each other beyond compare, loved their other brothers just the same way.

But hold Techno's world he did, and with enough time given to think, Phil slowly began to talk.

"I can't speak for everything you feel," he started out, and. Well. That was valid. "I can't tell you exactly what you feel because I...I don't know it. I hadn't even known parts of what you told me, okay? Which. I *do* expect to talk more about when you get home, Techno."

He stayed quiet. Maybe if Phil moved on, he'd forget any details Techno may have spoken about the sponsorships, about any of those companies.

"But...you're not a monster. Monsters are what we defend against at home. Monsters are people who kill others in a world where the fighting wasn't just- wasn't just for sport."

Dream, Techno nearly breathed, feeling sick all over at the thought of his brothers almost dying a real death, but he stayed quiet. Stayed silent.

"I don't know every detail, but when we've talked about it before, you just wanted to protect. You just...it was about family, I think, Techno. Family. Maybe whatever friends you've made along the way. About protecting what you had." He could just hear a sad smile from Phil. "Protect us so we don't have to do anything, you know? Which...which should be my job. I'm the oldest of the bunch, you know. Took you guys in. Kept you. And I wish I could help you figure everything out, but- as much as I want to say I know everything about you... there's so much I wasn't there for."

So much of Hypixel. So much of his life here, *none* of his brothers had been there for.

And his whole existence in the server had been, he realized, at least in some large part *for* them.

"Phil," he breathed. "Phil."

"...Yeah, Techno?"

"I. I. I became a monster for you. I became a monster for all of you."

Perhaps some said he was a beautiful monster. Others said he was simply a monstrosity, he was sure.

But- it was all for them, wasn't it? All the struggle and all the words that wouldn't come out and even though he wandered about Hypixel trying to pick it up again and find himself- some small part of him remembered what he had made for his siblings. Some small part of himself could- could tally up his failings, could tally up his successes, could ring up the numbers and lay out just how much of his existence had been focused towards his family.

His brothers.

"You're not a"

Techno closed the call and spent a good few minutes just...sitting there, looking out at the world beyond, for once not fading into apathy and confusion and settling for nothing at all until the world came back into focus. His eyes trailed lazily over the urban landscape- billboards, signs, people dotting the streets below and presumably just...living their lives.

All he wanted to do- all he had wanted to do, and, in some aspects, was finding he still wanted to do- was protect his siblings. Give them an even better life. No matter what parts of business that entailed, no matter the way a sponsorship made his lip curl or a public announcement made him stiffen, no matter how much blood stained his hands- it was all for them.

Fighting to get better, just in case they needed it, honing his style until it was something nobody could say was from someone else. Working to get them advantages in Hypixel's sphere of influence in the world- so many servers, so many people connected with them, even favor curried from some of the most ancient servers from before respawning was a thing- he tried so, so hard.

He learned thread embroidery primarily for protection. To help. Not for money. (Gods, he had enough money.)

And, somehow, these thoughts were the same between the person who had lived these events and the person who was remembering them after the fact, the person who felt as if they had farmed potatoes their whole life but- but found out that their world was so much wider than an island with potatoes upon potatoes.

And it had been Phil who had found him.

Phil, who- who was such a huge part of his world.

Phil, who had given him a home. Who had taken one look at his feral expression and thought *yes, this looks like a kid I'd be glad to have as a brother.* Who helped him and wasn't a parent, was *never* a parent, was never that well put together- but who had supported him and cared for him and all he had wanted to do was return it. He'd fight the world for Phil. He'd do anything his damned sponsors wanted if it meant giving him a special status on Hypixel or getting him pushed to the front of the private server licensing queue. He had done everything he could have to try and deliver Phil an easy life, a comfortable life at all costs, something where his oldest brother had everything he asked for and then some.

There had only been a deep sense of care in Phil. Worry and care and contentment whenever Techno was there, and he'd orbit around Phil happily if he didn't have others to worry about, either.

Phil meant so much to him. So, so much- Techno would go to the moon and back to keep Phil around.

“I see you like what we got from our trip to the spawn town,” Phil said with clear amusement, leaning against the doorframe when Techno gave a start and spun around, a pot for planting in his small hands, sprigs of...*something* nice and purple in his hands. “We don’t get a lot of those around here, do we?”

“What...” He struggled for a second to figure out the words, but- “What name it? Purple?” He murmured out a few words of his own language afterwards, running through the descriptors he knew as he turned back to stare the offending plant down.

Lavender; he thought, thinking of the tongue he had grown up speaking, but none of the syllables matched up. *Purple. This plant is green-grass-leaf-lavender-purple-rose, but how do you- what’s the color in English?*

“It’s lavender,” Phil laughed, and he pulled out the chair next to the one Techno had claimed at their little dining table. He pointed at the one Techno was holding, before gesturing to another pot they had. “Those look similar, they’re called alliums- but they both have the same name for the color they grow in as. Lavender. It’s just that lavender is also the name for this plant.”

“Lavender,” Techno repeated, the term odd on his tongue but feeling- right. A puzzle piece had been slotted into place yet again with their language. “Lavender.” He brought his face closer to it and sniffed once, twice.

“Like it?”

“Smells good,” he muttered, before bringing the sleeve of his shirt up to his nose and sniffing again. A different scent hit, that time- but it was a mix of his own natural scent and that which hung around Phil, that which was tucked into little dry red bundles where the clothing was kept. Techno considered it for a second. “Better than this.”

“Well- it’s a good thing I’m planning to plant these, then.”

Wait, what?

“I thought we could use some more spice around here! More color!” Phil’s mouth twisted just a little bit, though, in slight annoyance. “Not enough to use for bags or tea, though...I might have to get them imported in from another server. I have enough money on my old server where my mum is to get some from there, though, and I export some of my crops, anyways...”

Those words flew over his head. Who *cared* about strange-sounding, smooth English words like *imported* or *server* or *money*- instead, he heard *tea*, heard *crops*, heard *get some* and grinned.

“More- more ‘lavender’?”

“Yes, Techno,” Phil said fondly, “more lavender. We can even experiment with it in soaps or shampoo, no matter what Wil says about it, or...”

Life was good.

He'd even go back to the Nether if Phil wanted to go there to protect him, to keep everything at home fine. Even Wilbur, though he was still rude. He'd protect the life they had. Techno wanted to wake up and smell the lavender and relax, wanted to wake up and go about the day and do whatever came to mind, wanted to practice his sword more and try to make Wilbur's posture not small-fragile-terrible and wanted to make Phil's life easier wherever he could, and- and-

“Thank you,” he blurted out. “Thank you, thank you, *thank you-*“

Phil's spluttering would do nothing to change the spark that was kindling in his heart.

Chapter End Notes

vibrates into the next dimension

i've gotten a lot of work done on the next chunk of snapshots for you all! i hope you all continue to enjoy it, repetitive as this section is! tasty introspectiveness coming up. enjoy.

ALSO I GOT MY FIRST VACCINATION SHOT THE OTHER DAY POGGERS

xxxvi. recite the songs that kept me whole

Chapter Summary

He thinks of his brothers. He breathes in and lets himself ruminate over what once was.
The night is quiet.

(Or: There's a point at which you'd give up every little shard of yourself to others if it meant those you care for will be safe and happy and want for nothing.)

Chapter Notes

[chapter title from "done bleeding" by the mountain goats]

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

With thoughts of Phil came threads of Wilbur's presence in his world, a figure just as present as Phil had been as he had grown up before Hypixel. A dumb haircut, a little sneer on his face occasionally- but Techno could only smile faintly as he thought of the person so, so close by in the apartment.

Willing to come and help. Willing to accompany him even though he had pressing matters on hand- a brother forged through bickering and pushing at each other and coming out of it with something stronger than blood tying them together, even if Techno had always gravitated closer towards Phil.

Wilbur, of all things had given him a sense of spirit. Had given him a song that resonated in his heart, a song that beat to the rhythm of *punch this dumb kid who's shittalking me*, to the rhythm of half-formed melodies underpinning a gently falling sky, to the rhythm of words left unspoken that were just as loud as those shrill and petty arguments they constantly had gotten into growing up. He'd die for Wilbur just as he would Phil and Tommy, would tear through hordes of enemies, human or not, for them no matter what.

If it had been at all possible, he would have roped himself into as many horrible contracts and sponsorships with musical companies as he could if it meant gifting Wilbur more instruments, if it meant getting the best of the best together to teach Wilbur when self-taught tunes weren't enough, or to give him albums before they were released- but he had never been a singer. He wasn't their ideal choice to be sponsored by. Missed opportunities, he supposed.

Techno would import all of the songwood he could from the small server that made it if he could just reach out, its existence at the heart of any discussion high society had about music. He would make sure there was a guitar made from it, would take precious time to etch in enchantments and even try and stitch a bit where it would let him all for the sole purpose of letting the symphony of Wilbur's soul resonate with everything it touched just because he deserved it.

If only he had ever managed that. Techno turned over memories of researching the availability, of contacting artisans to commission something- but it had never lined up.

Nothing ever did, it seemed, with such endeavors in his past. In the past of who he had once been.

He cherished Wilbur beyond all reason, who he had fought with. Cried with. Killed monsters with and gotten into dumb situations with and who had egged him on into more and more reckless behavior before they had slowly fallen into different spheres of the world, fallen into different orbits with Techno in Hypixel and Wilbur...elsewhere.

Wilbur was the plucked string that Techno would keep safe just so he could hear what it had to say, just so they could coexist and get into more meaningless fights. Gods, how he wished he was sane enough to get into more meaningless arguments about the sky, about a show, about a song.

How he wished for that. Oh, how he wished.

But he had disappointed him. He had dragged Wilbur away from something he had been coveting, from a situation that Wilbur had needed him in, and now things were probably crumbling and it was all his fault and he'd tear out his heart in atonement but then they'd get more sad and-

Techno breathed shakily, the fond remembrance turned sour. He put his face in his hands and breathed in on a count, out on another.

Wilbur was still his brother. There were some things that mattered more than other servers, even if Techno knew he didn't quite merit a 'drop everything' kind of attitude. Maybe, if Phil had left him on the island, maybe-

But that wasn't what mattered.

He thought of his brother. Thought of his dumb smile turned sly, the edges to him that Techno had seen growing up but had mellowed out further by the time Tommy entered the equation.

Thought of the times that Wilbur worked on music, a frustrated calm before a serene storm.

"You're sure sittin' out here a lot more often, lately," he observed, falling into the flat cadence that his voice had naturally shifted to with English over the last two or three years. The patterns were still foreign in form, his voice still slow and careful- but *oh*, how he cherished watching the way that Wilbur's eyes lit up, clearly pleased with understanding what he had to say before his gaze fell back into a closed-off shade. He watched his brother's hand fall still on the guitar that rested in his lap.

"Yeah," Wilbur said, and his voice was guarded even as he had those eyes colored by reluctant interest, by a hint of happiness that Techno had joined him. He watched Wilbur pat the ground next to him, the rickety little dock that they still often sat out at during the night, and motion for him to sit down.

It was well-lit. Nothing would get them there.

They still had their weapons, though, just in case- the bow and quiver on Wilbur's back. The red-rock- *netherrick*, Phil's words echoed in his mind, *it's called netherrick*- sword he still had strapped to Techno's own. It clacked on the docks rather mildly, gently coming to a rest as he sat down, cross-legged.

Wilbur's eyes creased just a little bit, at the edges. He smelled of wood and dirt and the herbs that Phil and them attended to, and Techno relaxed at the familiarity of it even as Wil tilted his head a fraction in response. "Does it matter why I'm out here, Techno?"

"No," he said, dry, smooth, uninterested in tone even though he very much *was*. "I guess it doesn't. Keep on bein' a mysterious person sittin' out on the docks, asking f'r a monster to get you."

"Excuse you, I could shoot them in an instant!"

"If one of them crept up on you..."

"I'd be *fine*." He sniffed. "I'd like to see *you* do better, pig boy."

"Pig boy." Techno rolled his eyes. "That's a new one." *Not*.

"And if you hear anyone else say that to you, I'll kill 'em, I will, only *I'm* allowed to insult you, you know-"

"Pretty sure that isn't how insultin' works."

"Is too."

"Is not."

"Is too-"

"What're you workin' on this time, Wil?"

The conversation was neatly derailed before Wilbur so much as jokingly swiped at Techno's shoulder. His gaze went back to his guitar, well-loved and painstakingly maintained, and the

teen hummed and sighed and shrugged.

"I though I'd really work on original stuff for once," he muttered. "Not just, like...stupid little shit meant to insult you or others or whatever. Not even workin' on songs I already knew. But it's *hard*, and I keep accidentally copying other songs, and—"

"Who cares?"

"What?"

"Who cares about, about..." He waved a hand out and sighed. "About, uh, copying. Or whatever." He snorted. "I don't know much about music. It just...sounds nice. Sounds good. Whatever you make is yours."

"But...it's not *mine* if I'm just repeating—"

"It *is* yours," Techno said, voice hard and firm. "It *is* yours. Wil."

"Techno."

"Just do something you like," he said softly, gentle in the night where he wasn't in the day. He let his legs uncross and scooted over until his legs were hanging off of the dock, unclad toes skimming the water. He wriggled them lightly and watched the faintest impression of a fish in the water dart away. "Something you like," he repeated. "It doesn't matter. It will sound good."

"...Phil would know."

"And he will say something happy. He will say that you improved." He quickly grew tired of the conversation. Techno- he didn't *know* music besides what Wilbur had to offer, besides whatever he had to say on the subject or what Phil hummed while making food. Techno hadn't heard music before but for the hunting chants that piglins made, the chants that weren't songs but were instead hushed murmurs to disorient a hoglin or to keep all of them organized as they surrounded an animal.

He knew *those*. He knew how to mimic those harsh noises, the use of language only used for the memorization and for a distinct pattern, the rise and fall of the cadence if only so he could use it on the smaller hoglins on their lonesome.

He didn't *know* any of what Phil and Wilbur called true songs and music, but he *did* know the way Wilbur's songs made him feel.

He *did* know the way that he could feel himself smile, a foreign expression for his lips to take and fight against how he let his face rest, when a tune floated into his range of hearing.

And Wilbur had to know that. Had to see that.

Techno let his toes wriggle a little more, bare in the way that Phil only allowed so long as he made sure they were clean when he came into the house. He could feel something nibble at his toes lightly before he shook them, and something darted away yet again in the water.

And he had a bit of a think.

“What,” Techno said slowly, “do you think of...of...other people’s songs?”

“I- what?”

He was trying to make a point. He didn’t know exactly how to word it, so he hummed, the sound rather frustrated for the quiet atmosphere as Wilbur picked at his guitar.

“I mean- it depends on the person? And the music? Maybe the genre-“ what was *that* word-“but it’s all a matter of preference, not that you’d know. I really like the ones that-“

“What do you want for your own?”

Silence fell. Techno started to swing his legs back and forth, back and forth, back and forth.

“...I don’t know,” his brother finally said.

Techno only gave a mild hum in response as they both let their minds pick over what he said. They both sat there, Techno with a sword on his back and his toes making ripples in the water, smelling wood-dirt-herbs-Wilbur and the lavender that he’d begun to scent his own clothing with.

The strumming started back up after a moment of quiet.

Good.

At the very least, Wilbur would give his words and what he tried to actually convey with them some more thought, now.

Nowadays, Wilbur always seemed to have the kid in tow. Always seemed to have Tommy in his wake, a hurricane all of his own with the energy to prove it.

Tommy had given Techno, in some ways, a voice. He had appeared when Techno was already firmly in Hypixel’s grasp, from what he knew about it all, even though he was at their server more often than he was catering to Hypixel’s whims at the time. He had given him reason to pause, to make sure for at least another year that their stranglehold wasn’t too extensive on him.

The kid *pushed* him, kept him going with screaming and banter even through the most exhausting nights. He had come as a distant relative of Phil’s, nobody else willing to take him or able to take him, and Phil had opened up another space in his heart for someone who was struggling- another younger brother, connected by blood that didn’t matter in the face of the relationships they all ended up forging together.

If someone yelled at Tommy while they were somewhere else, there was always hell to pay. He'd always protect Tommy, even if it seemed begrudging- from others who wanted to scream and shout at even a minor offense given their way at a kid's brash words, from general assholes who never wanted a kid underfoot, from Tommy's own dumb mistakes when fighting monsters. No style, no skill, barely any practice to survive in the wilderness instead of the small city he had lived in before.

He would guard Tommy from the world if he had to, no matter what horrible choices he made. He would guard Tommy from himself. His shrill voice grated, it scraped along all the polished sides of his hearing too harshly sometimes to give it a smooth finish and annoyed him to high heavens- but Tommy was his brother in all the ways that mattered.

Tommy was his. Tommy was *theirs*. He felt the way that he had trained his younger brother in his bones, distractions taught to be just that, *distractions*, and to eliminate whatever wasn't necessary in the thought process-

(Clearly, he hadn't been good enough. Dream had shot him down. Dream had gotten him to wage a war over *discs*, of all things, and it had spiraled out of control enough in combination with Wilbur and a new nation to cause a fucking *war*. Maybe if he had been there, maybe if he hadn't been so busy scouting out what Squid had been doing, planting more potatoes for himself, absolutely hyperfixated on something that didn't truly deserve his life or death attention- well.

He just had to be better, now that it was all over, than the person he had been before- no, the impostor who had lived in his body- *no*, just his past self, nothing more. Had to be faster. Had to be less stupid, *gods*-)

He was his brother, no matter how abrasive he was.

He was his brother. His younger, youngest brother. He'd guard Tommy with his life and then some.

"You're- you're *always* at Hypixel! You're always on the TV and I have to watch you beat those assholes but you don't even come back! You barely train me! What's up with that, huh? *Huh, bitch?*"

Techno let his eyebrows arch slightly as he fashioned an edge on a knife, scraping it pointedly against a stone just right for the job. His eyes didn't stray from the blade. At the corner of his vision, he could see Tommy pacing, pacing, always pacing and being annoying and loud and-

"It's my job," he said simply, flatly, and kept working. "Not everything revolves around you, Tommy."

“Don’t think that I didn’t forget you and Wil didn’t *want* me here! I came in and you all were like ‘*nooooo, Phil, we don’t want some stupid kid here*’ but guess what, huh? That stupid kid’s here and he’s *staying* and-“

“You’ve been here for almost a year at this point,” Techno said, dry and to the point, and imagined that Tommy’s face was heating up with the anger of any other young teen at being spoken to in such a way. “I’m pretty sure you were here to stay from the start, Tommy. Ain’t any reason to think otherwise.”

“And you took me to Hypixel twice, but don’t think that, like, *negates* anything-“

“What’s there to be negated?”

“I’m pretty fuckin’ sure that- wait, what?”

“I said,” he hummed, “what’s there to be negated? Any bad will you had towards me? Any ill intentions on either of our parts?”

He held out the blade and squinted carefully at it. If he soaked it in the right combination of potions and stamped some standard runes along its center- yes, it’d make a good knife for any occasion. Cooking, paper cutting, stabbing someone. It’d do the job just fine. Spectacularly, in fact, if he used some more specialized runes, but they didn’t make stamps for the runes he knew by heart.

Tommy, predictably, spluttered.

“You just did that ‘cause you had to! Because I’d snitch if you didn’t!”

“And?” He tilted the blade in the light and nodded, satisfied with his judgment, and brought it down to keep honing an edge. “Doesn’t stop the fact that you had a good time there. I had a good time. And I’m here as much as I can manage, Tommy.”

“Then teach me shit!”

“Like what?” His eyebrows stayed sky high. “You haven’t exactly asked me about what I’ve been doin’ for the past while. And you’ve been here the whole time I’ve been workin’, almost. You could have bugged Wilbur but you’ve just been talking at me for the past hour, hour and a half.”

“An hour and seven minutes.”

“Thank you. I could have checked myself if I actually wanted to know the times.” He snorted softly. Tommy just grumbled at his side.

They stayed there in silence for a few minutes- Techno trying to make final adjustments for the moment, Tommy watching him with a moody air emanating out from him, all brimstone and fire and the faint scent of fresh laundry echoing it like an attempt at a balm.

Teenagers, he thought, exasperated. Had he been this bad at that age?

...Come to think of it, he probably had been. Both he and Wilbur had gone through their most annoying periods at about the age Tommy had been, maybe a little bit older.

“Tell me what you’re doin’.”

Techno hummed. “I’m-“

A ping.

[teach]: Want me to bring food? An hour from now, yeah?

His voice and his movements stilled. Techno brought a hand up to rub at his eyes and sighed- annoyed, irritated, stressed, but most of all just...just *tired*. Of *course* he had agreed on today to meet up and go over a rune set that he had been struggling with, but he had forgotten, of *course* he had. He had forgotten and Tommy would be *pissed* and he had so many damn balls to juggle that he kept losing them to the mercy of the floor.

“...Techno?”

He stared at the blade. He could feel its weight a bit more than he could before, could feel the weight of his own cloak pressing him down and choking him, the pressure of his decisions and his stupid *mistakes* even moreso-

“Techno, what’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” he said flatly. It was probably obvious by the way his tone had gone that way, a forced kind of flatness instead of the natural level nature of his voice, but- everything was *fine*. He just...had a packed schedule and even though he had only arrived here in the morning he already had to go home before dinner. A dinner that Phil was starting to make. “I just...I just...”

“You just- just *what*? ”

“I have to head out,” he said quietly, and started to pack his supplies, started to wrap the knife in a cloth, put everything away, and tucked it all neatly into the bag that was a few steps away. He was a quiet blur of motion, and even Tommy’s hand brushing up against him did nothing to stop Techno from baring his teeth and tusks and keeping on going. When Tommy pushed up against him, put a more firm, angry hand on his arm- he snapped out his arm and shook him off.

“You- what the fuck, Techno, you-“

“*I said*,” Techno snapped, voice the crackling wire of tension of a pressured man, “I have to head *out*.”

“What the *fuck*, man? Phil’s making dinner- you were making that sword knife whatever the fuck kinda thing- weren’t you going to stay for the night? What the hell?”

“I have to go.”

[techno]: Food sounds good. I’ll make sure you still have access to the whitelist for my apartment. An hour from now, yes.

Instantly-

[teach]: Great, great. Be there soon.

[techno]: See you.

He rummaged through his bag for what he had brought with him that wasn’t going to be leaving this place. After a second of searching, he pulled out a few items- a beanie. A scarf. A jacket.

“Tommy,” he said sharply, cutting off whatever the kid was still harping on about. It was another second before he stopped- but they stared at each other, then, Techno’s exhausted eyes boring into Tommy’s own furious gaze. “*Tommy.*”

“*What, bitch?*”

“I know it’s been cold lately,” he murmured, the chill of the moment whispering by his face as if to remind him a second later, “and it’s been like that for a few weeks, but- I figured. I figured I’d give you these before winter actually hit. Beanie’s for Wil, scarf’s for Phil, jacket’s for you.” Techno ran an idle thumb along the stitching he had put on the underside of the jacket before sighing and extending what he was holding.

“...What?”

“I meant to- to-“ Ah. Words were hard, yes they were. “I meant to give these to you at dinner,” he mumbled, slight embarrassment rearing its head. “But. I forgot about something I have to do at h-“

At home, he had nearly said. At a home that wasn’t actually a home, that had never been a home, that he couldn’t stand and never would be able to stand because it was a monument to how well he could coat a place in blood and how well other people could commodify him and market him to the masses and make money off of his image and send him spiraling down but it was fine because the apartment was so nice and he could barely find much time off and-

"I forgot about something I had to do back at...the apartment," he murmured. He didn't look Tommy in the eyes after that. "I. I'm..."

Silence fell. Techno wilted under it all. Didn't look directly at Tommy.

"Tell Phil- tell both of them that I'm sorry," he mumbled. "I really am, Tommy."

He straightened, made sure that the bag was securely hanging off of his shoulders, and looked a bit more firmly at Tommy- Tommy, who had taken the items with slightly shaking hands, who was examining the stitching on the items with an expression and a furrowed brow that was becoming increasingly *perplexed* as compared to angry and sad.

"Wait- you- you bought these-"

"I'll come by when I can," he said quickly, cutting off the question with jittery hands, shuffling feet. "I'll- we can fight monsters together. Can show you what you're doing wrong. Phil taught you well, but- you're still a newbie. A noob."

"Hey, *fuck you*-"

"See you, Tommy."

And he was hustling off to the waypoint, a gobsmacked Tommy behind him, and it was made all the more cutting that Tommy didn't even try to follow him. There were no extra steps. There was no real shouting off after him. There was a silence that rung more than Tommy's words ever had, the younger brother he still didn't know as completely as Wilbur and Phil did, but. Well.

Maybe he'd try to come back even sooner than he usually did. Such a scrawny kid really did need more training, anyways.

(At least- that's what he told himself.)

Even the thread enchantments had been for them. Even though he had grown to love it for the art and craft that it was all on its own, at the start he had really just been doing it for them, for them, *always* for them. What was greater than not having to fork up your life's savings for a shirt that acted similar to a chestpiece, or a ring that could negate poisons if worn for long enough, or a hat that was near completely waterproof from the rain, something that could still keep itself clean even with that fact?

It could be as something as huge as a complete outfit, something that whispered *protection, protection, protection* until it surrounded them in a halo of Techno's own wishes. It could be something as simple as enhancing the enchantments on armor and weapons further than enchantment tables and potion solutions could do- make it take one more hit before it

crumpled. Make it bend rather than completely shatter. Make a helmet deflect things it shouldn't, on average.

Make a fishing rod catch fish that were a luckier catch. Make a net- well. Nets were nigh impossible to enchant beyond a potion solution. How could you even embroider thread itself?

He'd drag down the world for them and wrap them in fabric that'd keep itself warm. He'd devour anything that came to collect on something that others would think they didn't deserve. He'd keep that world of Phil's safe, would protect his brothers from *anything* and *everything*, and-

And even if the embroidery was tainted by the fact that his teacher had *killed* Tommy, gods, if it had been a regular world, if it wasn't warped by whoever the admin truly was and turned into a respawnable server, if Tommy had fucking *died for real*-

Had Dream noticed any marks of his work? Had Tommy worn the shirt he had done a simple thread enchantment to and hidden, one that made him a bit quicker to dodge? Had he noticed Wilbur's beanie at any point, the thread the exact same color as it but the fact of an embroidered piece enough to make anyone brag to everyone they met, though- had-

Had Dream known?

(Had Dream *cared*?)

He had become a monster for them. He had gained a library of scars partially in how he was raised, but also in how he had pursued his mastery of it all. The worlds they all frequented were not kind. The scar from the spider bite, even now, sometimes pulsed to remind him of that fact. He had become a monster and he would own that fact and- and-

It was the *context* that mattered.

The context. His wishes. His desires. Selfish, but- but not *really*. Selfish in that he just wanted his family to *live*, even at the expense of himself if need be. But that had been the him of before.

What did the him of *now* want?

Were they the same? Were they different? Would he ever truly figure that out, given enough time, or would he always be dragged down before realizing it? Would he strive to act as the previous self would, to meet what his brothers expected, or...or...or what?

...He knew a few things that were the same, that stayed the same in his jumbled up psyche. That was easy enough. He knew things that would be constants, things that connected the *then* and the *now* without any trouble at all.

He knew three facts at his core- no, three truths. Three things that had stayed ever since he met Phil. Since he met Wilbur. Since he met Tommy.

He'd deliver Phil the sun.

He'd bring Wilbur the moon.

He'd give Tommy the stars.

Whether they asked for it or not, no matter how alone he wanted to be at any given moment- that fire had been reignited. Really, it had been. There was no mistaking the lightness in his heart whenever Wilbur and Tommy joked around, even as he drifted. There was no mistaking the way his whole self just *settled* whenever Phil rambled on about something, or the pure comfortable *joy* after the confusion and the panic was gone when they had all been in one spot, even if he hadn't entirely understood the reason for it all.

He still didn't entirely understand.

Maybe he never would.

But it was inevitable, for him to love those he drew close. Even Dream, conflicted as he was about him- he didn't love him truly as a friend, not now. He'd never be family. But the person had *mattered* to him in that way, once upon a time- and that past him had appreciated the friendship. The comradery, even though they found themselves fighting in public on a stage, and he'd have to respect that even when Techno wanted to search him out and demand he repay Tommy for the murder. For the deaths.

He'd respect the friendliness the previous him had fostered, even if he only felt a trace of it now, just enough to agonize and tear at his hair and rattle apart.

It was all for them. For his family. For those he knew. In some way, it was for all those he had called a friend of some different sort- Squid. Simon. Others. Even Tubbo, as much as he was Tommy's friend and not his.

How could you come to terms with yourself? How could you come to terms with what you did, even if you were coerced into it or forced or put under peer pressure for it all? Was it all justified because of the initial wishes?

There was no black and white. There were only myriad shades of grey that he was falling into. There was no complete crawling out.

It was one step in front of the other.

From where he sat, staring blankly out at a city that, somehow, he had forged whole parts of himself with his battling prowess and media marketing, it was a quiet realization, something that trickled down the back of his mind, the fog having been there in the months since Phil had found him and however long it had been before.

A subworld of this place had caused him to forget those he cared for. To forget why he cared about them. To forget, most of all, what he had forged himself into to care and protect them and- and-

There was no complete healing.

There was only moving on.

And he'd have to face his brothers with that knowledge, one way or another, and figure out how to live with himself while working through it all. Perhaps, in the end, nothing would change. Perhaps, in the end, he'd be just as unhappy with himself as he had been before leaving the bulk of Hypixel in the first place.

Techno would just have to figure it out as he went, wouldn't he?

Slowly, he registered the incessant pinging at the back of his mind. A call from Phil. Another. One from Tommy and Wilbur each. More from Phil.

He closed his eyes.

They could wait.

Right now-

Right now, he'd rather mourn what he had been, once upon a time, before he shelved it all away in an emotionally inadvisable box and tried to work on what he would become.

The family that worried so intensely over him could wait another few minutes.

He kept his eyes closed, regardless of the way that the cyan wash morphed into lavender that morphed into a mirage of a color blend, and took in one breath, let it out, took it back in again as his body went from shaking apart to gently settling.

The monster under his skin could live another day.

It could be dealt with later.

For now, Techno simply *breathed*.

Chapter End Notes

snzzzzzz

the end of the hypixel arc is coming up. take that as you will.

in related news: i do hope i won't have to take a short hiatus, but, well. it really depends on how much i write in the next few weeks. i don't exactly want to publish anything post-hypixel until the section is done. i have a lot of anxiety about going on a hiatus, haha. i don't want to lose motivation and such. maybe i should stop being so hard on myself in terms of writing but, like, i should be, so. eh. i have a story that needs updating.

i just want to make people happy and make myself happy by actually finishing something ive done for once, even if. a lot of it is majorly flawed and very self indulgent.

have a great night. i'll be back to sitting in my isolated corner of the fandom and writing away. o/

xxxvii. one day i'd like to say what all the tug-of-war was for

Chapter Summary

Techno makes some eggs. Training swords are kinder than those made of steel. Once upon a time, a misunderstanding grew.

(Or: You can be similar in so many ways but still be different enough to form something of a rift.)

Chapter Notes

[chapter title from "mineshift" by dessa]

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

How did you become the person you once were, while preserving whatever you had become?

Techno leaned against the kitchen island, staring with a quiet exhaustion as Tommy and Wilbur walked out of their rooms, bumbling into the living room at different times of the morning. They had come back home the night before with worry in their voices and panic in the way they eyed him, mostly because Phil had snitched on him calling, talking, and hanging up- but deflecting arguments and conversations was as simple as just refusing to participate.

Sleep clouded their eyes and slowed their steps in the haze of morning, as indistinguishable from other times of the day as the light always made it. Techno turned and started to make some lavender tea, quietly drifting around the kitchen as he readied up something simple, something he had undoubtedly made a few hundred times in this kitchen, at the very least. Muscle memory would help him.

Eggs and toast. Barebones, simple as that. A nice fried egg, or scrambled eggs, or eggs over easy- all simple enough. Over easy for him. Scrambled for Tommy, who stumbled in first. Over easy for Wilbur, too, a remnant of a time that he only faintly remembered of two kids bickering over shared eggs in a quiet kitchen.

It was a gentle morning. It was something he appreciated, having barely slept the last night- it let him eye his brothers and the ways that they obviously weren't quite thinking straight, let him sort out his own emotions before they bowled him over and decided it was better to do something else. Bah, he didn't know.

Their exhaustion was something that slowed his own steps in consideration. They were tired in more ways than just because they woke up not too long ago- they were tired in the way that Techno recognized, the kind that sunk down to their bones and lingered, emotionally spent in some ways and too low of spirit to go on with the same energy as before.

Come to think of it, Phil had given off the same energy. His voice had been cloaked in something almost unidentifiable, but there had been a familiar nature to the way he had slowed his speaking, had lingered on some of his words even with his worry.

And it was all because of him. Because of the stress he had put them through, standing still and refusing to move before he was good and ready for it.

In some ways, he had been the cause of a bit of burnout.

Speaking of which-

Techno had shown a lot of that- that burning out over the years, hadn't he, the Techno in his memories? There were so many spots of action, of speaking, of fighting...but there had been so many other half-remembered scenes where he had just...looked out the window. Laid his head on his desk, too spent to lift it again and go back to work scribbling in his notebooks. There had been days in which he had skipped breakfast because he could barely get out of bed to go to meetings, much less make something to eat, and had to choose one of them in order of stupid priorities.

He served them without so much as a word and watched them grumble words of thanks before, over their food, they slowly seemed to realize that it had been *Techno* to feed them instead of some kind of a phantom. Watched, shoveling eggs and toast into his mouth all the while, as they looked at him like he was some kind of a strange, mythical creature that had finally revealed itself to them.

Watched as their eyes slowly started to light up.

"...Techno?"

He tilted his head in response, mouth full, and gave a lazy hum.

"...Oh. Wait- you're here, just like Phil- wait- what? Is everything- your memories- are they..."

It was obvious what Tommy, a little quicker to wake and a little quicker on the draw, was asking as he trailed off.

Are your memories all back?

That...hurt more than he expected.

But still, Techno hummed. He consulted his memories without too much thought, already knowing the answer, and contemplated the still-gaping holes in many places, the numerous smaller gaps that hadn't been filled in no matter what. Some of the biggest gaps had been patched, but- well.

Some of what was left would take weeks, months to fill in. Other parts, years. Some- probably never.

He shook his head wordlessly and watched Tommy's expression fall. Swallowed his food and tapped lightly at his plate with the fork.

When could you decipher what was past and present in the movements you made? How could you tell if the tilt of your head was something you'd do anyways, or if it was a distinctly pre-memory loss quirk of his?

When was a monster not a monster, and someone bound by corporate rules not a lacket, and, and, and? How did one separate the wheat from the chaff?

"It'll take a while," he eventually said, licking his lips and looking down to see an empty plate. He absentmindedly pushed it to the side. Tommy's eyes were bright with the realization that oh, it wasn't a fluke, Techno actually is talking. "The...some of the more important memories came back, though. Enough for me to...to get a general idea of my life."

Words. They were hard.

"Wait- wait, really? Important memories as in- as in you coming here for the first time, or meeting me, or, or, or-"

"You've always been this annoying." Techno sniffed. "I know that much."

With the way Tommy's eyes lit up, with the utter *glee* in him at such a simple bit- it softened something that had been an unbending rod of steel inside of him. He smiled back, just a fraction, and watched as his younger brother puffed up a little.

"I wouldn't say I'm *annoying*, just- energetic, you know! That's what everyone's *always* said about me-"

"Tommy," Wilbur intoned dryly from where he stared into his tea as if he were greatly wishing it were caffeinated, "you are the only person who would say that you are not annoying."

"Excuse you-"

"Even Tubbo."

Techno didn't drift as they argued back and forth. He stayed pleasantly tuned in, sipping at his tea with a leisurely smile peeking at the edges of his lips as if it were a mirage. His brothers noticed- but they didn't try, exactly, to forcibly pull him into the conversation. They danced around bringing him in, left spots open for him to interject- and Techno felt like he could finally, truly breathe for once in his terrible, hellish apartment as he picked and chose where to include himself.

Not all things could be healed- but this?

This was the start of some healing, that was for sure.

Maybe, in one world, his trip would end with him being sucked back into the grind. Maybe companies would have bitten at him and dragged him under, drowning far enough to never see the light of a world outside forced obligations ever again.

Maybe, in another, he never would have been found by Phil to begin with- or maybe everything would have gone the same but for his fighting prowess being fueled by true bloodlust instead of familial duty, instead of pure survival.

Maybe, if one went far back enough that he still only had the barest outline of the life he had lived, he could have never met Phil. Never left the Nether.

But he lived in none of those worlds. He lived in the here and now, and it was in a startling kind of present day that he found himself back in the training room he had used ever since the apartment had been his to live in, a blunt wooden sword clutched in two hands as he stared across at his brothers.

He had never wanted to go to a fighting event on Hypixel, not since witnessing them again on the screens and only feeling a gaping pit in his stomach. He didn't want to see blood in truth, didn't want to be pushed into one of the games and reveal himself again or watch from a distance as the true gore was scrubbed in a split second purely through the glass that separated those who viewed in person from the competitors. He didn't want to face that. He refused.

Instead- well- later the same day, after a lazy breakfast and a conversation that flowed easier than any other talk had since they arrived at Hypixel, Techno let himself fall into a stance dictated by muscle memory in front of his brothers.

He wasn't human. Had never been. He was a hybrid- but that in and of itself didn't make him a monster. What made him a monster was the amount of blood and death, cold and heartless, on his hands. For a split second, though, he wasn't a monster when he loosely stood in front of those he cared for. Even with the scars that criss-crossed and wound their way across his body under his clothes, even with the ones curving right across his face as he stared them down-

He was Techno. He was a brother. He was someone who cared for others and was...was probably cared for in turn.

(There was still so much more to sort through. So much left untouched. But- he had to push that away, for now. Had to pretend for a day that he wasn't one of the worst people he knew of in the world. Had to keep the facade up. But- he was fine with that.)

Maybe this chapter of his life ended thusly: with Techno not demanding a fight in an arena ringed by viewers but in an informal spar in his training room with his brothers, with blades

that had no edge, all blunt and unable to do anything like tearing and ripping and gutting someone out.

Even if it ended with him thinking that it had been the case, even if it ended with him choking on panic and his sword falling to the ground as he thought that he had seriously hurt Wilbur, even if he continually checked for the next day if Wilbur *really* hadn't gotten away with anything more than a bruise-

Not everything could be reconciled. Not everything was patched so quickly.

Even if he had no complete ability to always shield those he loved- how could he protect someone, truly, if he couldn't stand the thought of fighting with everything he had, with becoming a weapon and coating himself in the blood of others again?

He had to grin and bear it.

He hadn't loved it before, Techno had to remind himself- and he wouldn't suddenly start loving blood, hurting others, hurting himself in the process. (He was pretty sure of that, at least.)

Techno held the wooden sword he had used in his hands, a day after that accident, that incident that shadowed his steps in guilt. He looked out at the wall that was just floor to ceiling windows and considered it all- thought about calling Phil. Thought about putting the blunt weapon down and going back to where Wilbur and Tommy were sitting around, making some snacks to watch a show with. He stayed there for time that was impossible to register, instead, hands chained by the fact that he was thinking about what he held in them.

A sword. A blade- a blade that was ineffective. A blade with no edge.

"What'cha thinkin' about there, Techno?"

He didn't turn his head. Wilbur walked up next to him and stayed by his side. Not entirely pressing for something he couldn't speak up about and say, but a presence that he couldn't help but find comforting.

Instead of saying the truth, instead of responding with *I was thinking about how I imagined I had gutted you out and everything that was meant to be inside of you was outside* or even *I was thinking about the fact that I'm not fond of violence, not really even with training swords*- Techno sighed. Let one hand grasp the handle so he could lift it and drop it down to rest at his side.

Maybe he wouldn't be perfect again. Maybe he didn't have to be a replica of what he had once been, to his brothers. Maybe the pieces of himself superglued into the wrong places were fine- the material was there. The exact shape of how they made him up was just- different.

At least he knew parts of what came before.

"I just remembered the other day," he said mildly, not even flicking his gaze over to side-eye Wilbur, "that you were the one to steal that juice box from my fridge three years ago, when both you and Tommy were over here. Not Tommy."

"Well." A pause. They both considered Techno's statement. Wilbur hummed. "Shit."

Techno turned and raised the wooden sword in a small little mockery of what he *could* do, even if his hand trembled just a hair with the motion- and off Wilbur went, cackling and prancing off to the living room.

"Everything's almost done," Wilbur called back, "and you better be here before Tommy fucking starts it!"

Who was he to not set the sword down and go there after that statement?

His brothers were his world.

He'd follow them to the ends of the land on any server and then some.

"Say, Teach- Dream-"

"Hm?"

"Why," Techno murmured, sitting back to stitch along the line of a hat, taking care to only go through the inner lining, "do you wear a mask? Even now, after..."

After they knew who each other was? After there was no need for boundaries that- that separate?

Why do you wear a mask when there's nobody who can see your face except one of your friends?

"Say, Techno," Dream echoed from the chair across from him, mask tilting up to look level at him, "Why do you wear your cloak at every opportunity? Hmm? Even before the one you embroidered, you had a cloak- why, Techno?"

He snorted softly. "Don't see why that matters, Dream."

"Then I don't see the point in you asking me about my mask. Just a matter of preference, Techno, and even if there was more than that- it'd be personal." Dream's mask still kept that eternal smile, even if his voice indicated a sharp frown. His own work was fast, quick with irritation, movements angry and more than a little annoyed. "You're a friend, Techno, but I don't ask about why you keep a cloak on you. Pushing's just rude."

"First time I asked," Techno said, but neither of them were very inclined to argue, especially on a day that had been otherwise kind to them. Techno had been able to finish his first project, a runic set for a scarf for Wilbur in a mustard yellow lining that complimented the soft dark brown of the scarf, and his friend had made a large amount of progress on the blanket he had been off and on working towards finishing recently. "...Sorry."

They fell silent, kept working, stitching, writing.

Techno leaned back after a few more minutes and let the back of his head hit against the chair he was in. Thought about his plans, about what he had going- there was so much to *do*, so much that he always had to keep tabs on his communicator even then, waiting to see if someone came in and pinged him with something urgent. Something to change his schedule.

"I have a match tonight," he said to break the stretch of silence, somehow unable to keep it in that comfortable silence for long. Something in him wanted to stretch, wanted to speak. Sighed a second later, something heavy enough to make him close his eyes afterwards.
"Challenger for the Blitz title, of all things. 'M rusty."

"You always say you're rusty," Dream hummed, "and then you go out to obliterate them. No chance. Never really any chance- afraid of this person, or something?"

"No. I just...don't really want to do it, anymore." A soft snort, a mimicry of the defensive one from earlier. "Wish they'd just leave me alone and let them have it. Some challenge'd do them some good."

Teach- no, Dream, he had been better at that lately after they had fought and shoved blades at each other enough to get plenty of fresh scars on Techno, wounds that still threatened to trip him up in matches rather than properly fade away upon a death. Dream *deserved* proper use of his name, and he had been better at using that name for the man that had come so close to killing him- *Dream* tilted his head and let the words fall into silence for another minute or two.

He'd respond, given enough time. Techno wasn't exactly worried about that. He kept on working at the hat, unpicking something that was a bit too skewed of a line for the enchantment to flow seamlessly, and redid it.

There.

The silence was comfortable if nothing else, even though he'd rather ramble. He'd give Dream some time.

"You don't want that clean sweep of the boards?"

Huh. Just a question.

"It's not like I've actively gone through some of the other games, the other modes." Techno tilted his head until he heard more than he felt a soft crack. Popped his knuckles on a whim. Let himself take a sip of lavender tea. "I'm tired of it, Teac- Dream."

“Tired of...”

“The...fighting. The sponsorships. The deals.” He side-eyed Dream just a bit. “You haven’t gotten any sponsorships, from what I’ve...seen. All I’ve heard about you was from the actual...battles.”

The man had next to no media presence. They stared at each other. Dream seemed bemused, but there was something eating quietly at Techno, something sharp-toothed and curious.

“Nope,” Dream said, popping the ‘p’ with an amused tone that made him feel almost like, behind the mask, he was winking. “Not at all.”

...So Dream didn’t get it.

He definitely understood, on *some* level, what Techno was going through. He knew bits and pieces that, on the whole, Techno wasn’t too interested in sharing more of- but he only knew of it from talk, it seemed. From hearing others chat. On the higher tournament circuits, there were plenty of nightmare stories about contracts. About sponsors, even if he had only heard them at the edge of his hearing, half of his competitors avoiding him like the plague. Quartz’s star.

But it was impossible to get this far and *not* have given in to take even a low-key contract with someone.

“Nothing. No...no contracts, sponsorships, anything.”

“Nothing.”

“I’m tired of the fighting,” he repeated, as if it would miraculously make Dream, who had even laughed in the heat of a tourney battle Techno had watched outside of their match, understand that it was more than the fighting, more than fame itself. “Of the...*eyes*.” Everyone that watched him. Fans. Sponsors. Agents.

“You can walk away at any time, can’t you?” Dream reminded him of an owl, almost, in the way he tipped his head and blinked at Techno. “I mean, I get being chained down by fans, or by people you know, and all that, but- why not just go, then?”

Techno closed his eyes.

Of course Dream wouldn’t understand on that most fundamental level.

Of course.

“I think I’m a bit too tired for this conversation,” he sighed, looking for an escape and just looking up as if that would solve it all. “I...yeah.”

Dream still wore a mask. He didn’t have any sponsors, didn’t have any contracts, but he had been the one to approach Techno. Had been the one to teach him an art that he now loved. Adored, even, to some extent.

But there was no understanding their circumstances. There was extending a hand blindly without knowing what to do. There were Dream's eyes, shielded behind a mask, unable to properly meet Techno's own. There was a barrier between them even with how close they had gotten.

He just didn't understand Dream, and he wasn't sure if he ever would.

All that, he supposed, for one of his only friends in Hypixel.

The rest of Dream's visit was spent in silence before Techno was called away to his match, cape secure around him and waypoints dancing at his fingers. There was no fanfare spent in the leaving. Dream gave him nothing even close to a goodbye- no '*have a nice match*', no '*stay safe*', no '*see you later*', nothing other than a lazy humming.

It weighed on him. His fighting was uninspired, almost lazy for him, which got him a reprimand afterwards by his agent, by Quartz, probably by ultra-fans picking apart his fighting style- but all he could think about were the questions that Dream had unknowingly raised for him.

If he hadn't been through the same experiences, then how, in that odd way of his, could he sympathize so much with parts of what Techno had showed him over the few years?

When he washed his hands off back in his apartment, out of anyone's gaze and back to being mindful of the twinging of the scars all over his body, he watched the crusted blood wash off and swirl down the sink and wondered:

Is this what it feels like, to have no anchor?

Chapter End Notes

i don't think i have all that much to say besides the fact that there is one chapter left in what i consider to be the hypixel arc. after that, there's a good chance i may take a few weeks to finalize the next section of the fic; please bear with me in case i do go on a small hiatus. i will do my best to keep you updated, although updates in the end notes of next chapter will not be entirely reliable. for more frequent updates the discord is available (in end notes).

thank you all for your patience. this story's scuffed and messy and meandering with no extremely firm point but i do care for it. <3

xxxviii. the emptiness that fills me up / is farther from me now

Chapter Summary

Times and cloaks are compared. Techno despairs, yet again, over merch. Phil waits for them to come home.

(Or: When is a home not a home?)

Chapter Notes

[chapter title from dark road by sarah jarosz]

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Techno was thorough in washing his hands, just like he always was. Five seconds with every movement, scrubbing back and forth. Back of the hands, palms, between the fingers, making sure to get the dirt out by circling all the fingernails against his palms. Wash for a comparable amount of time, check every bit, make sure the soap was gone.

Repeat as many times as it took to feel comfortable.

His own mental loose ends were frayed all over the place. Collecting all of them wouldn't be possible- but even pushing most of his own angst and worries about himself to the side, there was one problem that presented itself over and over again, urgent for a reason other than his own anguish: Dream.

He dried his near-raw hands with a towel and absentmindedly drifted back into his own room to consider two cloaks laid out side by side- the one he had come to Hypixel with, and the one that had hung up in the room upon his arrival, the embroidery of his transitioning from apprentice to thread enchanter stitched neatly onto its velvety underside. Both had spent the longest time in the hands of Phil, who had sewn it all together.

He considered them both and wondered about the person who had helped set him on the path to put those final touches onto the embroidered cloak.

It had been his hands that had let him learn about thread enchantments, about the power held in such a tiny string that would be woven in and out of fabric. It had been Dream who had spoken about it with such passion- and he had found Techno when he was low. When he was at one of his lowest points, alone in the city and not even in his apartment, and he had taken that extended hand.

For some reason.

And it had changed his life.

The cloak bore the result of at least a year or two of teaching and training and learning on it, months of chicken scratch in notebooks and heated debates on the nature of the art he was learning and times spent in the orbit of one of the only people he truly talked to outside of his family. Skeppy was an in and out presence. Schlatt had shown up later, later, much later- and wasn't that name familiar in relation to his brothers and Dream too? Wasn't it?

He thought fondly of Dream, but there was something strange for the taste he got when he thought about it all. Something didn't *quite* sit right with him and he had no clue what that oddness actually *was*. All he could do was sit back and worry at his lip and get frustrated because he truly didn't know what he had to do. Didn't even know what there was, exactly, to be so worried about.

But he had killed Tommy on a small server that, by all rights, shouldn't have a respawning core to it. Had hunted down people just for making a fun division that was called a nation in good spirit, according to what he was told. Had started a war with his brothers- had caused multiple wars, even.

The cloaks that laid in front of him weren't entirely about Dream. In the end, it had been Techno to design the pattern that went on the one that had been stitched. It had been Techno who picked out the scarlet thread and ran it through the fabric, intent singing a crystal clear melody in his heart. It had been *Techno* who had finished it up and *Techno* who had put it on like a shield against the world and *Techno* who stood in front of the world and let anyone who came challenge him and his impenetrable defenses.

It wasn't entirely about Dream, not at all- but even as he packed the cloaks up, folding them both neatly and tucking them at the very bottom of the bag he had brought the first one there in, the masked man wouldn't completely leave his mind.

When he had spoken to Wilbur and Tommy about leaving Hypixel a day or three prior, they had seemed...relieved. They wanted him to go back to Phil, and had most likely wanted that to happen ever since Techno had started to drift off course. They talked between each other- about the farm Techno had, about parts of the server they hadn't been around to, about looking forward to seeing Phil again.

When they thought Techno couldn't hear them- *hah, foolish-* they spoke of L'manburg. They spoke of a *Pogtopia* again, they spoke of *Schlatt* with venom laced through their voices, they spoke words of *suck it green boy* and *there's so much more work we need to get through* and *have you spoken to Tubbo lately, how's everything going on, we need more people behind us.*

A picture began to slowly form in his mind, and Techno wasn't sure if he liked the piece it painted at all.

Nations. Wars. Elections that they wouldn't let rest, tyrannical governments that had to be taken down- all on a server named after Dream, who had to be a friend of whatever

mysterious admin was willing to let go of all the big hub worlds and venture off on their own to give a little server a life after death.

Unless he was the admin, like what his brothers had seemed predisposed to thinking, but-gods. He wasn't sure. He couldn't be sure.

So much of Techno's life had revolved around protection. Around fighting and bloodying his sword and being an untouchable figure in the eyes of many. That wasn't something he could deny, as much as he hated it, as much as it kept him up at night.

And he wondered if his brothers needed protecting from- from something.

He double-checked his bag. Made sure that the notebooks he had squeezed in were fine. Made sure that the clothes he had taken with him were neatly in there just like those he wanted to bring back from this wardrobe. Snuck in a few of the weapons that looked like they were there more for beauty than for lethality, instinct rather than memory guiding what he chose. Some things, it seemed, he just couldn't quite let go.

This place wasn't home anymore, and he had to take whatever he could with him, whatever could be useful to him whether in their use or in their beauty- because he was never coming back. Not again, not to this spot, not ever.

This apartment, as soon as he took the waypoint to the ground floor, would be dead to him.

When he was done packing, he took a step back. Lingered in the doorway as his brothers talked, leaned against its frame after a second and drank in the sight.

The room wasn't well made. Things were pushed aside so he could get at bits and pieces of his life. The world was pushed just askew enough that it looked like someone had robbed the place of a few items and left. Maybe that was his legacy, in the face of the life he had lived- clothing, some weapons, some notebooks and lovely things stuffed with lavender put into his bag but everything that had been unwanted remaining in the room.

It would be the end of a chapter of his life.

It would-

Ping.

Ping, ping, ping-

He twitched his fingers, huffed softly, and opened up the call sent in his direction.

“Techno!”

“...Phil,” he subvocalized, too comfortable in the quiet of the room and in the ready conversation of his brothers close by to speak out loud. “I’m...”

How could you say *sorry for hanging up on you when I was having a rough moment?* How could you say *I don't know if I'll ever figure myself out but I think, in some ways, I'm looking*

more forward to the future while also dreading it more than ever? How could he force those words out and not have them sound...disingenuous, in some way, from however he said it?

In what way could the truth force its way out despite all the challenges it faced along its way?

"Heard you were headed home," Phil said when no continuation seemed forthcoming, a smile in his voice. Techno closed his eyes and imagined, just for a second, that he really was back home. That he was- that he was in some way free again to farm as he wished. To do as he wished. "Any time estimates on it, mate?"

"We should be heading out soon," Techno told him before slowing to a stop, listening in on what parts of the conversation his brothers were having that he could overhear.

"Haven't even packed your clothes- come *on*, throw it *in*—"

"You can't make me, bitch—"

"Oh, you little brat, I sure can—"

"Maybe not soon as in a few minutes from now," he concluded, comforted with something more concrete than feelings to talk about. "They're...bickering. I'm, uh, ready. They..."

"They were last to get ready on your way out when you left, so of course they're late today, too," Phil said, and that amusement was doubled in how he chuckled. "As always. I'll take it as you getting here in maybe an hour, if you head out soon and take your time walking back out to the outgoing and ingoing server hubs..."

"...An hour?" Surely it hadn't taken them that much time to leave the apartment and get here in the first place, but...yeah. They hadn't exactly stopped to look at that much on their way there. "...An hour," he concluded firmly, and nodded to himself.

Techno stood there for a second. The words that lingered still on his tongue...well.

No better time to say them, he supposed.

"Sorry for hanging up on you the other day," he mumbled. "And...and...everything that's. Happened recently. I just...I just wanted to...to remember."

"...Have you? Remembered, that is?"

He carefully didn't touch on what Techno had said. He- that was good. He was fine with that. It made him smile, even. He didn't want to talk about companies and contracts and blood that he'd still see on his hands half the time even when he wasn't fighting. Techno breathed in. Slowly let it slide out of him.

"Not everything," Techno murmured. "But...enough. Enough to...move on, at least for now." He clasped his hands together. Didn't let his fingers so much as twitch as he breathed in the comforting lavender that cloaked his former residence. Thought about what he'd drink when he got home, what Phil would probably have all ready for him. "I'm coming home," he whispered out loud. None of it carried to his other brothers. That didn't matter.

“...Tell you what. You, me, out on the docks or in the fields or whatever when you get back. Just us. And we can talk. About...about all of it.”

“...That sounds good, Phil.”

Contrary to whatever his brothers thought, he wasn’t ignorant.

Or, well. Perhaps he was, thinking back on it, a pair of earrings dangling from his fingers as he stared incredulously at them.

“I am not wearing these,” he said dryly, “to an interview. Or a press conference. Or—“

“Hey, what do you mean about that? That’s just an extension of that first favor, you know! If you can’t slip a true partnership past those dumb fucks you call agents, then just say you bought it because it looks nice!”

“And not because of a startup you’re headed that you want to shoot to the moon and get rich off of.”

“Exactly! You know me so well, sugarpl—“

A raised hand.

Silence.

“You know, you’re a fuckin’ buzzkill, you know that, Blade?”

“As you’ve told me a million times, Schlatt,” he said, dry as a desert, and brought his hands up to delicately slide them through pierced ears one by one. “What’s next for this, more jewelry? I’m not getting any clothes embroidered with the design.”

“You know it! Necklaces, bling, maybe a shotglass, get some good press out there...”

“All from that first favor,” Techno murmured, mouth twisting into a frown.

“Not your fault you didn’t—“

“Negotiate more carefully,” he said with the air of a man who had gone over the same quip a million times. “I know. I get it. Just as long as you keep your end of the bargain.”

“I never go back on my promises, you know! Just ask Conno—“

“I don’t care.”

“You wound me.”

“Good.”

He let whiskey burn down his throat and savored the bite of it before setting down the glass he had picked up on a whim. He looked at himself in the mirror, glittering golden earrings dropping down, a stylized S on them, carefully detailed markings- and sighed.

That's all anyone's going to talk about. I barely wear different jewelry.

He side-eyed the hybrid next to him. Schlatt's grin only grew wider and more utterly unashamed of himself.

“I hate you,” he said without any heat to it.

“I know, Blade. I know. How about some more whiskey?”

There was a delicate difference between a bustling city and an overbearing metropolis. They teetered on the razor's edge of it as they walked, as Techno kept a hood up and thought wryly on the way that some nodded to him as a cosplayer, and wondered how many people would talk about those rumors.

How long had it been since they had arrived here with high hopes and higher expectations? Weeks. Over a month, possibly two, but his sense of time had been shot even when using technology.

Of course it had been shot ever since- well.

Best not to think on that.

“We're not stopping for anything,” he said almost to himself as he found himself uncomfortably in his own skin in a way that he hadn't felt since setting out. and he could almost believe that would be the case with his brothers flanking him on either side, with them too far into the usual pedestrian scramble that was Hypixel, all public transportation and walking and cycling, no sign of a distraction yet. “No stopping.”

“Oh- oh shit, Wil, look at that, can we please go there, we need to get some Blade merch for Phil before we get home-“

Oh no, he thought faintly, and got whisked away through the crowds and to whatever Tommy had spotted very much against his will.

That was the problem of being surrounded by family as well as other people- overstimulation and no ability to actually break free whenever he was being dragged around.

He was well and truly fucked, wasn't he?

It was just his luck that they spent, ah. Far too much time there. So much time picking over unimportant details and his brothers sniggering yet again over the fact that they knew who Techno, the Blade was and nobody else did- and everyone else acting like Techno was just a dedicated cosplayer because- who would actually wear Techno merch while dressed like him, all made up to look exactly the same? He had always worn finery on camera. All smooth buttoned shirts and ruffles and that stunning cloak.

No, this was just a nerd who wanted others to think he was Techno.

He stuffed his hands into the pockets of the hoodie he was wearing and perused more goods, eyes skimming over what was available.

Buttons. Earrings, glittering and gold and-

He pulled a hand out to squint at it.

No, no. It was just a little crown for one side, a tiny sword-shaped golden charm on the other. His absentminded memories still shouted at him for room, but some were odd, non-linear but still begging for attention and he didn't get any of it and...ugh. It was tiring.

But the earrings reminded him that there were more people than Dream to ghost his steps. He had recognized Schlatt's name when Tommy had talked to him that one day, however subconsciously.

He wondered if he'd ever truly remember whatever Schlatt had encountered him for.

Only time would tell.

He moved on.

“So...what do you plan to do after this?”

Two people sat at the edge of a cliff that dropped off into nothingness. One of them had their legs dangling off of the edge, not swinging back and forth but still enjoying the way the wind battered at their legs, the way they were so close yet so far to falling off. Next to them, another person sat with their legs crossed, a good foot away from the edge. Both of them stared out as the moon started to properly rise above the expanse of the void.

“...Not sure. You?”

“Maybe I'll go back to...to trying to replicate art pieces on the walls.” The person who sat at the edge laughed softly. Shook their head. “Bit hard to go back to doing much else, though. The potatoes won't harvest themselves, and it just feels...wrong to leave them alone.”

"Hm. Same, Squid. What else would I do, go back to the hub?" The person crossing their legs snorted.

"You're such a bozo, Techno," Squid said, and there was a fondness in his voice that couldn't entirely be representative of what was a friendship. Theirs was a strange rivalry, a friendly rivalry- but what was there to fight over now, that Techno was proven so far ahead? "They don't appreciate you there, or whatever. You said you were famous, right?"

A hum.

"Why aren't you famous for this?"

"...I'm famous among those that play and live and work here," he mumbled, "but..." A shrug. "Doesn't matter. Maybe...Maybe after I clean up my fields a bit, cut down on the sprawl...maybe I'll go home. See family."

"...You never went to go visit them, or something?"

"...Nope."

"Techno, I- I can't believe you, not even your family?"

"Twice." He paused. Amended it. "Once. For Christmas. I called them the other time."

"...I can't *believe* you," Squid groaned, exasperated. "...Back to work we go, though, right?"

"...Bet my clean-up harvest'll be triple yours."

"Oh, you wanna bet?"

The moon rose. They parted.

They had thought it would be a month and a half, maybe two months before they met back up again.

That meetup never happened.

(Of course. There were some things that couldn't change in post with the half-thought out wish of a remembering man.)

They both left with smiles ghosting their lips.

I'm coming home, Phil. Just wait for me.

I'm coming home.

Chapter End Notes

happy birthday to techno, even though i hope he never reads this.

and so the hypixel arc ends- and a short hiatus begins.

i'm about ~70% done with the next bit, i think, although the actual length could change. i have about 38.4k written so far for it. i hope you will all be patient with me as i finish it up and gather a decent enough editing buffer to start posting again. i'm. rather sad at myself that i couldnt finish everything and have it done months ago, i suppose, but such is the way of things. i hope for the hiatus to be just about a month, maybe a hair more or less, and for updates after that to be either weekly or bi-weekly.

a chapter count should also be added by the time i'm done with the hiatus. ;)

if you would like updates, the discord (in the scuffed secondary end notes below) is the best place to find them. it's generally a chill chatting server for dsmp & just general talk. it's also my only contact with the outside fandom LMAOOOO

yall have a great- day. week. month. etc. my cat gives you a kissy. <3 yall all mean a lot to me.

-

edit 6/22/21;; chances are that the hiatus will extend another half month to a month, with the update now scheduled towards the end of july. i think this is the first actual break i've taken from this since late october and a few things are picking up in my life away from the fic. exercise, work, other things. my deepest apologies.

xxxix. the land we left becomes a dream

Chapter Summary

They return. Phil watches over them. Techno goes through the ritual of making hot chocolate.

(Or: Coming home can't solve everything that's wrong with him. With all of them. With the situation and- and- and everything, really. Coming home doesn't solve all that much.)

Chapter Notes

[chapter title from "corsican mastiff stride" by the mountain goats]

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Their trio stepped out of the space between worlds and onto ground that instantly made Techno relax. There was a stark difference between the natural ground and the slick paving that made him so floaty in Hypixel. The ground was slightly soft, the air damp and heavy with the smell of the earth after rain, and that very petrichor made Techno close his eyes and simply *breathe* as his brothers walked forwards.

If he looked one direction, the gentle landscape boasted a field that looked so, so different from how he had left it- but barely so, in other ways. The rows of potatoes were a little messier, the ground a bit overworked, and he grimaced slightly before letting his gaze roam the other way.

The house. The fields. A sloping, varied incline up to the treeline, where he could see the curious gaze of a deer on the far end watching then from afar. The stream that ran into the ocean at the bank, the beach clean and untarnished.

Phil, watching from the house's porch with a gentle smile on his face.

Before even Techno knew it, he was breaking into a run down the dirt path to the house, feet pounding on the well worn path, and even he could feel the wide, stupid grin on his face threatening to break him into crying. He darted past his brothers, cloak waving in the wind with its shock of untarnished red, and he extended his arms-

-and Phil's closed around him, locking him into a hug that he gratefully returned. He huffed out a watery laugh into Phil's shoulders, his own shaking all the while, and he could smell the roses on Phil, could smell the rain and dirt and the roses and could hear Phil's own watery

laughing, could feel the way that his older brother held him as if he wasn't sure that Techno was entirely real.

I missed you so much, neither of them said out loud. *I missed you so much,* Phil's hold said, *and I can't believe I couldn't visit you, it broke me so much to hear you break down and hurt and lose yourself to what your body wanted you to do and-*

Techno was probably imagining what Phil's body language told him. It wouldn't be the first time, and it wouldn't be the last, that was for sure.

"Waitin' for me on the porch like a loser," he murmured into Phil's shoulder, muffled by clothes and by how tightly he was pressed against Phil in a hug. Techno supposed it didn't matter- his arms were just as tight around him, too. "Couldn't've even been inside to give some sort of a surprise. Nerd."

"You're the nerd, mate," Phil laughed, and despite everything, the smile on Techno's face grew wider. "Not like it's a surprise I'd be here!"

So much had happened. He had gone on a journey to find himself and hadn't entirely done that at all, stuck on a path that wound and twisted and went back on itself with setbacks and challenges. He had gone into the fire and had come out burnt but with some semblance of a consolation prize.

"No, you are," he huffed. "I'd never be a nerd."

His ears twitched to hear footsteps behind them, his other brothers oddly quiet. He could still hear Phil's slightly shaky breathing, could still feel the way that his hands ghosted over his back at points as if not entirely believing the situation- but he was there. Why would it matter?

...Perhaps it mattered just because of the distance. His hands were doing the same thing, after all, running back over what he had already touched. Patting Phil's back before he tightened the squeeze.

I don't want to leave for that long ever again, his hold said in response, aching and trembling as he shook on his own. *I hated Hypixel. I hated it. I hated it. You know this. Why did you let me go?*

They both knew the answer to that.

Of course they did.

"Break it up," a voice called out from behind them, and Techno looked back with a silent glare to see Wilbur's shit-eating grin and Tommy rolling his eyes. Wilbur rolled his own a second later before huffing at them, all outrage. "Gods, blocking our way into the *house*, what rude pricks-"

"Oh, fuck off," Phil said before breaking out into a smile- and the hug he pulled Techno into again, deeper than the one before, felt like the warmest thing he had ever experienced in his

life.

(That was false. The Nether was hotter. Much hotter. And he was used to hotter.
But the hug was nice.)

“How’ve the potatoes been without me?” His murmur was half-slurred by his own self and muffled by Phil’s outfit, but his brother heard him just fine. He could melt for just a second longer. He understood.

“Some of the more specialized varieties ya picked up a bit before you left are rough,” Phil chuckled, rubbing at his shoulders as they parted, “but they should be fine with a little love and care- tomorrow, maybe? It’s a bit late here, after all...” His eyes were soft. Kind. Welcoming.

This was the Phil that had found him in the subworld, the Phil that had looked at him, horrified, and tried to help collect the pieces of himself for him. At the same time, this was the Phil that had looked at a kid piglin hybrid out of his depth and had taken him in, the Phil that bandaged his wounds when he tried to sneak out to fight as many monsters as he could and got mobbed, the Phil that took him to events and supported him as best he could.

Support that went awry when he had two kids to look over at once, and three a few years later. Support that couldn’t be there when he wasn’t there physically because other, greedier people took their place. Quartz. Sinea.

Techno looked at his brother and saw a man that had simply been trying his hardest for the whole of his life to keep him and everyone around him happy.

“I love you, Phil,” he said- and the two behind him fell silent.

He’d said it before. But this was the first time he had said it with so much laid bare in his voice, the depth of his emotion fully expressed even through the soft, simple declaration. His hands, his arms, were at his side. Techno smelled roses and the faintest hints of lavender and the scent of grass sharp in his nostrils. He heard the way that Phil took a trembling intake of breath.

Phil, of all people, had to know how much that meant.

“Oh, Tech,” he responded, voice aching in all the quietest ways, “I love you too. We all do, Tech. We all do.”

They stood there, Phil’s hands on his shoulders, his own still at his side. They stood there for a time, barely a second or two but still infinite in meaning and weight, before Phil’s smile grew a bit, crooked but genuinely happy.

“Let’s get everyone something to eat,” he said, and the moment was broken- just like that. “I have some stuff pre-prepared, but for something hot, I figured I’d ask what you three wanted, you must be hungry...”

Techno dutifully followed. Phil would need a helper, after all, and it was only with the man in front of him that he realized how acutely, how sharply he had missed him.

He'd never leave for that long ever again.

He took a breath in.

"Prick, get out of the way, I'm not gonna be the last one in—"

"Phil, Tommy's pushing me, ground him or some shit."

"Hey!"

"Hey?"

He let it out.

With that deep breath, the house smelled ever so slightly more like roses than normal. How he hadn't noticed it when he had been taken here from Hypixel the first time, he didn't know.

It was comforting. It was nice.

He thought about roses long after dinner had passed and well into a tranquil night.

Back at what he truly considered home over the half-cozy half-too-fancy apartment he had lived in for what had seemed to be years over the course of his life, he found himself faintly amused- but not surprised- that he was utterly unable to fall asleep in the bed he had fallen into effortlessly before leaving for Hypixel.

Of course, he thought, that wryness seeping into his mind. Of course it's the first night and I can't even get a second of shuteye.

Techno supposed it made sense. However horrible and odd and very out-of-body his experience back in Hypixel was, he had grown used to that bed and it was probably odd for his body to try and start readjusting to this one. It was lumpy- although he knew in which spots, in a vague kind of way, and embraced it for that fact- and not at all like the cloud that other bed tried to pretend to be. This one was just right, and his body hated it for that fact at the moment.

All of that led to him drifting out of his room and down the hallway in the middle of the light, a waxing moon casting a gentle light over the world outside. He glanced out the windows in the living room as he walked, the feeling that spread over him not unlike the way his body had tried to autopilot itself in Hypixel.

But this was all him. It was him while tired, him while rather aimless, but he was in control of what he did.

(Was he?)

He found Phil outside. Not on the ground, but he was perched up on the fence that was erected around their main property, keeping the laziest of the mobs that roamed at night out. His brother had a sword on his back and a bow in his hands, quiver slung onto him.

For the moment, looking out of those windows out onto the fields and Phil- Techno drank it in, appreciated the scene for what it was, and detoured into the kitchen.

No lavender tea. No honeyed milk. Something even easier- milk thrown into two mugs and into the microwave, some hot chocolate powder for lazier nights, and a few marshmallows to top them off.

In pajamas and protected exactly not at all from whatever there was outside, Techno ventured out with two mugs in hand, bare feet curling at times into the ground as he walked to his oldest brother.

Techno's movements made sound. Quite obvious sound at that, from the way he scuffed his feet against the ground. Unmistakably a person, unmistakably real. As he watched, Phil's shoulders stiffened at the sound before they relaxed.

He wasn't a mob. He didn't want Phil to turn around and attack him.

Or, well- perhaps he was technically a mob, half-piglin and all, growing up in a place where there were no real humans and with only the law and language of the piglins to guide him by and-

"Hot chocolate," he murmured, neatly diverting his train of thought while he stood next to the fence. He raised up a mug- one of the ones he rather thought his brother favored, stylized angry-looking hearts patterned onto it- and let Phil sling his bow onto his back as well before taking it.

Techno clambered up onto the fence in return, looking out at the slope up to the treeline with a half-lidded gaze. He let his feet rest on the lower bit of fence and sipped lightly at the hot chocolate.

It was a bit too powdery, but that was fine. The marshmallows helped with that. It was also very, very hot, but sometimes the scalding was just a part of the experience.

"You should be sleeping," Phil murmured. He could just feel Phil's gaze on him, sizing him up and finding him wanting, finding him woefully unprepared for a night out on watch.

It's not like watch is needed every night, Phil. They only get brave in large numbers and prefer darker areas than this.

Then, another thought: *What are you hiding from, to be out here like this?*

...That wasn't quite a kind thought. He went back to considering how he would respond and sipped again at his drink.

"Y'r all alone out here," he mumbled, shrugging from where he sat. His ear flicked. "Give it a break sometimes, Phil."

Phil chuckled. Techno could tell how tired the other man was just from that- but they sat in a rather comfortable silence for another moment, another two.

But, as always, it was broken by some other collection of syllables brought about into the world.

"Couldn't sleep?"

Techno huffed.

"Bed there was too comfortable," he said, careless of the way that his tone went all harsh, went past slurring and into some of the syllables used more frequently by what his body and mind remembered of the piglin language. "But nothin' chocolate can't fix."

"Nothing chocolate can't fix," Phil repeated, amusement threading through his voice.

"Techno."

"What?"

"You're not wrong, I guess."

A snort. "Of course I'm not, Phil."

"Hah."

The moon was high in the sky. No mobs appeared from the woods, although there was ample time for at least one to come on and stagger its way out.

"Techno," Phil said after minutes that felt like hours, minutes that felt like days and years and eons- "What exactly- I... What exactly *happened*, over there? In Hypixel? I...there's only so much that... gets across over calls. Over texts." He sighed, nice and heavy and deep, and Techno closed his eyes. "Are you...are you okay, Techno? I...all I know besides rough details is that...things got bad there. For you."

"Not bad," he murmured. "Just. Complicated."

"Complicated." Despite the heavy atmosphere, Phil managed a sharp, almost barking laugh. "That's...*one* way to put it, it seems."

"One way to put it." His mild smile turned wry. He sat there and sighed, rubbing lightly at his eyes before he finally let himself relax further. He could trust Phil. Phil was someone he wanted to talk to.

"We visited places," he said, quiet and pensive. The hot chocolate was something he could retreat to when he didn't feel he had enough words. It was an escape.

Eventually, those refuges became. Unsafe.

"Tommy and Wilbur probably told you a lot," he murmured, "but we went to...many places. Cafes. Stores. Restaraunts. Never a tournament or arena." Techno refused to see how Phil physically reacted to that. Instead, he let himself continue to feel the warmth that he was leeching out of his drink. "I still think they were...were..." How to say it? "They were places that I thought they'd like. Before. And so I said I liked it, back before everything happened. And when they brought me places they said the places were things I liked. Because that other me had told them that."

"...The other you."

So *that* was what he had decided to pick up on. Techno stared down at his swinging feet, down into his mug, down to the chocolate and the ground and its slightly damp grass. "The other me," he echoed. Gave a dumb, wry little smile to himself.

"You're the same person," Phil said.

"...No, I'm...I'm not."

"...Techno, you've changed. You're always changing over the course of your life. But deep down you're not going to be an angel before and a demon after, or someone heroic in the past and the scum of the earth now." His brother chuckled. It sounded so, so tired and Techno didn't, couldn't- how could he *fix it*? How? "No matter what it all reminds you of, Techno... no matter how the context of it's all changed...you're still my brother. So I know that you don't entirely believe what you're saying about that, too."

That was the card he was pulling, huh?

"I don't think I ever really wanted to become a star in Hypixel," he murmured, finally glancing over to see Phil's own tired eyes, that knowing gaze staring back at him. To some extent, the two of them were on the same page. They both knew his anathema to fighting in some degree, but...had Phil really ever known much about Quartz? Sinea? Had he thought that Techno was more of a freelancer?

"A star." His unspoken question was answered at the slightly hurt glaze to Phil's expression, the one that said I would have done so much if only I had known of all of the specifics. "All I knew was that you were popular, Techno. Not..." He sighed. "Maybe I shouldn't've become something of a hermit," he finally said, the regret bordering his voice like a frame on a lovely painting. "You've talked a little about contracts, Techno. About stuff that started when you were young, because Hypixel's laws were lax." Phil closed his eyes. Techno went back to looking at the landscape just in case something appeared and his brother wasn't watching.

"Techno, do you know why you never really told me about any of it? Why you...why you avoided details? And said that you just wanted to live over there, and that you were living off

of prizes from tournaments when I asked you for details at the start of it all? Why you never even told me about events I would have chaperoned you to?"

....Did he know? Did he know the whys and hows of what he did back then? Did he even know what Phil was talking about in its entirety? He had gained so much, had gone through the mud of the past and come out with some gems and stuff that was more worth remembering, but he had the feeling that daily minutiae would always just...fall by the wayside.

How could he ever really remember why he hadn't done this one little thing? Why he had gone into a pattern of little lies until the reality he was living was in some way so vastly different from what his family thought it was, even though they knew vaguely of tournaments and sponsorships and televised dealings?

How could Techno ever pick out all the little details of contracts, or know the exact reason why he, as a tween or young teen or something, hadn't approached Phil to ask him to come to the banquet for all of Hypixel's young rising stars?

How? Why? What could he even do to try and remember such fine details?

"...Didn't want to bother you," he eventually murmured, lingering on it all with a sharp, introspective frown on his face. He sat back, picked at his fingernails almost idly when he had a spare hand, and started to finish up the hot cocoa. "I don't...I don't really want to talk about it, Phil." A sigh. "At least. Not now."

"...Just remember that you don't have to be what anyone expects you to be, right? And that...that you'll have to talk more about it eventually? For your own peace of mind?"

Techno studiously didn't look at his face. *Even with what you say, you still expect me to be how you think I was*, he thought mildly, too tired in the middle of the night to even bother to get angry over it. *You don't believe what you're saying, surely. I don't believe what you're saying.*

If only I had actually gitten back every single one of those memories and not individual bite-sized chunks, some broad strokes.

When he retreated back to the house with his mug drained and Phil's still sitting on a fencepost, Techno watched as his brother unslung the bow, as he kept it in his hands and sometimes made a grab for the drink. It was a few long minutes that he stood there, almost frozen in time- but the only change in atmosphere was the fact that a crow or two came to sit on the fence, not with Phil but nearby.

He went back to his room. Even if he didn't sleep, he could at least close his eyes for a while.

Baby steps, he thought. Baby steps indeed.

At least I'm glad to be home.

Chapter End Notes

hey. it's me. i'm a-mario, or whatever

sorry for extending that hiatus (see: notes of last chapter). honestly, i would extend it longer, but i'd feel really, really bad doing so.

the situation is thus: my motivation for a lot of things has really tanked. i've tried working on this and it's just...hard. it's hard. but i'm trying! and i edited this and it's up and all. the problem is that i still havent finished this section, although i have a decent amount written, and i even had to rewrite part of what i did write! i want to finish this. but with everything as it is, and things ramping up for me irl, i can't promise regular or timely updates. sorry, folks, aint even weekly. it's a whenever-exceed-can-lurch-over-and-keep-going update schedule now, buckaroo.

hope the summer's been treating yall well. ive been baking in the sun. fuck that. yuck.

i'll update when i can. apologies again and thanks for sticking around.

xl. tea, milk and honey never satisfy me

Chapter Summary

Settle. Drink. Speak.

(Or: Hear. Feel. Think.)

Chapter Notes

[chapter title from "tea, milk and honey" by oh pep!]

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Settling back in was hard. Both the private server and Hypixel existed out of time in different ways, the server a private pocket in spacetime and the apartment too far above everything to seem a hundred percent real, but Techno rather thought he liked waking up to natural light and not a melding myriad of unnatural colors. As lovely as they liked to be, well- if he wanted any kind of neutral light, those curtains had to be slapped in place and a light turned on.

At least the sky here was blue for most of the day, spinning on into warm sunset hues as the night fell. At least it spoke in indigos and crimsons and gentle oranges instead of lavender, cream, cyan.

The potatoes had been waiting for him. There were concessions to make— they wanted to keep an eye on him outside, which, fine, he guessed—but it was a relief to go back to menial tasks that he could see the result of. The dirt got all under his fingers and smeared against his skin and he breathed in and felt like some of the gaping holes in his psyche and memories were filled.

(*As if.* But it felt nice.)

Farming was something he'd never be able to let go, Techno found himself thinking. He would always be able to crouch down and breathe in and let all of the smells of the wet earth come in, especially after rain, damp and present and *there*. Techno could tell the moisture of the soil by poking at it a bit with a toe, by sniffing and letting it settle. He could check, by smell and sight and hearing, how good the potato plants were coming along.

Phil had done a good job while they were gone, but nowhere near the level Techno found even a bit of pride in. There was something special in nursing a plant to the point where it

gave you food, he thought, and while he didn't understand everything from the potato war and before, well...there had to have been a reason besides the want to talk to nobody and keep going.

Even if he lost his memory doing so.

Life was slower in this private little universe than it was in Hypixel. He almost felt a little foolish, thinking that coming back would speed everything up more. Half the time in Hypixel, though, his memories had been triggered by something or another, horrible and unstoppable and like the tides. Instead, everything here just...slowed.

Techno rather thought that he liked it.

There was a pleasure to be had in knowing that your actions were wholly your own. There was a satisfaction into tilling the earth and raising plants and harvesting them, especially when you could feel it all. There was a soreness to him that he greatly appreciated having back. A soreness from getting back to work, from using his muscles again, from living more or less in the present. At least...well.

At least he wasn't wholly drifting as he had been so often before. His brothers engaged him in conversation over the days. He wasn't alone. There was no communicator to break or shatter or tear, unless he fucked up his body alongside it.

That realization made him perk up a bit more than anything else did.

There was no physical, disconnected communicator to break. That was nice.

And he wasn't alone.

No matter how bad things got, he wasn't *alone*- and when one of them thought he was drifting off they pulled him away to do something. They didn't force him, but...they didn't let him keep going off into whatever he was doing, whether it be dreamland or, or...or something else.

Sometimes, he spent the night outside with one of the others, especially on the nights where mobs were expected to try and come back out.

It was something that had to be done. Had to.

"Say, Techno," Tommy said rather bluntly one night when it was just the two of them, an axe in Techno's hand and a sword in Tommy's as they patrolled just past the edge of the woods and looked inwards, "you hate this shit, right?"

He glanced towards his younger brother in a wordless kind of inquiry.

"You know what I mean, you- you- *agh*. Fighting 'n shit. Why not stay inside, bitch?"

Techno paused to examine a particularly dense bit of shrubbery. A twig snapped. They both peered into the forest for a long few moments, hands grasping tighter at their weapons.

There was nothing there besides a fox that blinked slowly at them. They kept going. Techno wondered, faintly, on how he should respond.

A few minutes passed in relative quiet. Tommy started rambling about anything and everything soon enough to fill the space between them- what animals he didn't like, what he thought about certain monsters, the dinner they had all taken together as a family hours ago. Not pushing the topic. Being almost, scared as Techno was to jinx it, *considerate*.

In a moment of silence, just after they found a skeleton and its core was still dissolving on the edge of Techno's axe:

"Because it has to be done," he murmured in response, hefting his axe a bit to watch as Tommy's face grew thoughtful. As he started to connect some of the dots.

"...Because it has to be done," Tommy repeated, and looked towards the direction of the house. Techno didn't follow his gaze. Someone had to be watching their backs in case something jumped out at them. "What about the, uh, blood?"

"I'm fine with blood."

"No, you're *not*," Tommy hissed, rounding on him with a ferocity that made him blink. "I might miss a ton of shit but I- *fuck-* you're not, like, a closed *book* or anything, okay? You're an open book, actually, a *super* open book that says shit like 'I'm super *duper* scared of blood!' and 'Tommy is *soooo* cool!' and it's obvious. *Geez*."

Techno stared at him, baffled. A second later, the axe was on the ground and his bow was drawn in a swift motion to shoot a spider and pin it to a tree.

"*What the hell*, Techno- oh."

"Oh," he echoed wryly, and put his bow back where he had kept it. He glanced at Tommy's twisted face, clothed in shadow, and looked away, uncomfortable. "...Not liking blood doesn't mean I...can't fight. I'm good at it. Mob duty's just something everyone has to do. Just don't want to fight for...sport." A small snort.

Don't want to fight for the spectacle of it. Don't want to fight when it's not needed.

Somehow, that concept, even after spending so long observing Techno's changes in Hypixel and here in the times before, was anathema to Tommy.

His mouth was agape. Techno looked at Tommy, bemused, and went to keep walking the perimeter. Occasionally, he looked out at the greater area- no mobs were examining the fence, the farm, the docks. As always, they preferred to stick to the forest's edge unless they had overwhelming numbers.

"You- I- why *wouldn't* you fight? All these years, you're- you're the *Blade!* Me and Wil were going to ask if you wanted to come and help our revolution, you know, we told you, I- and you don't like fighting?"

"Being the best doesn't mean totally enjoying it," he said flatly, and ignored the caveat to his whole message:

I don't typically enjoy it, but I enjoy a challenge. I enjoy combat for fun if nobody dies, if everyone goes into it knowing it won't end in a bloodbath.

I don't enjoy a massacre where I always had a near total chance of winning.

I enjoyed fighting Dream, when that match happened.

Dream.

He stared at Tommy and thought about Teach- about *Dream*. Tasted the mirage of reconciliation between him and his brothers but bitterness kept flooding in, kept whispering about the fact that in a serious setting, Dream's apparent response to conflict was a duel to the death. Was to ambush. Was to murder.

How much had he changed since the memories Techno had regained?

...Were the memories faulty?

"But- but- *the Blade!*"

"And that's a name I don't think I like particularly well." Techno rolled his eyes. Let Tommy follow him. "I'm not...not the exact same person as '*the Blade*' anymore, Tommy." A sigh.

He could just imagine the stories his past self must have told Tommy, the deadpan bravado and white lies and dry humor that spoke of *never beating me in a thousand years*, or flashy moves to entertain him as he brought Tommy up to an acceptable level of combat, could imagine...could imagine...

Could imagine Tommy falling into some kind of hero worship, even now, because he had probably seen the Blade on television and on videos and the networks and advertisements crossing every remotely sizable world about the Hypixel Hub's star combatant.

"And I was never the exact same person that everyone saw in the commercials and fights, either," he said softly, and let the atmosphere turn more contemplative.

Tommy didn't touch that topic for the rest of the night.

Go figure. He seemed to fuck up everything like this nowadays.

Techno's thoughts spun through the gauntlet. He thought about glamorous parties, about Quartz representatives and Schlatt preferring a glass of whiskey in quieter environments as,

in the present day, he swirled some lavender tea in a wine glass (of all things to swirl some in). He watched it slosh around in vague amusement before sniffing it and taking a sip.

...Hm. It needed something a little extra, today.

A dollop of honey and everything was perfect—or close to perfect. It was a quiet day. The potatoes had already been taken care of, a short endeavor since he had gone in a deep dive on what they needed the previous days. Overcast weather made it, altogether, not a terrible time to curl up on the front porch once his glass (and a thermos to refill the glass from) was all taken care of.

Not a terrible time to look out towards the docks, towards the behemoth of a lake that a nearby river flowed into, and relax.

There were no duties that absolutely had to be attended to, which he...didn't mind, for the first time since getting back. Wilbur and Tommy were the types to try and busy themselves in more elaborate ways. They were the ones that got all twitchy when they had nothing, absolutely *nothing in the whole world* to do. Phil took the moments of quiet in stride and worked on hobbies, fished, did whatever he wanted. A private server wasn't all about maintenance and hard work. He deserved the breaks when they came either way.

Techno's mind kept straying to thoughts of the fabric that he had brought back with him, something he had barely thought about when packing. Kept straying to what he now knew hid in parts of his room, a few sets of thread, a collection of needles that he hadn't paid attention to on his first sweep of the room lurking there like a monster under the bed.

After all, why would he pay attention to any of that in his first month or two or three here when there were weapons covering the walls? Why would his mind be drawn to any of it when there were flashier things to be concerned about?

When the fact that someone was claiming to be his family was more concerning than whatever was held in 'his' room?

But it itched at him as minutes passed into an hour, an hour and a half, even though he was more than willing to let it *be*. Even if the idea of sitting out on the porch, sipping not-wine from a wine glass, was absolutely wonderful and had to be repeated when there was someone else there to be so stupid with, when the others wanted to actually all sit together and just...spend time together. Quietly.

Techno had parked himself in place and he wasn't going to move for anything so silly as an 'intrusive thought'.

Hah.

Come to think of it, Tommy had walked in that one day. Had seen all the evidence of his thread enchantments right there, his stitching on his lap. Had he spilled to the others? Were they lying in wait for the moment in which he'd finally rip the bandaid off and say '*Yes, this is me, I was a thread enchanter all along*'?

He took a long swig of the glass and refilled it soon after, plodding in and back out of the house. The days were slower and more nebulous in their very nature, but he held more sense of self through it all. Remembered every time that he had thought so, the note reoccurring more than thrice on any given day. He sat there and noticed the drier patches of grass, looked out towards the great body of water on the edge of the land, looked back ever so slightly and saw a dragonfly flit by. One minute. Two. Three.

“That’s sure a wine glass you’re holdin’ there, mate, huh?”

He turned to look at the entryway to the house and saw Phil in the doorway, looking down at him with a peculiar expression, a bit of a messy look, slightly out of breath. He took that in the nature it was probably meant: had Phil really been panicked in some way when having not seen Techno in his room, in the kitchen, in the living room? Had he asked his brothers where he was and got nothing?

Had he forgotten to call? Ping?

Techno nodded towards the glass and then wordlessly gestured to the thermos. His brother took the scene in- him taking sips from the glass and looking out at the land. A breathy laugh escaped him, and Techno quirked a smile.

“Yeah,” Phil responded, almost as if to take his role in the conversation too. “Yeah, it’s a wine glass.” He gave an utterly inelegant snort. Techno respectfully ignored it.

After a stretch of silence, he saw Phil sit in the chair beside him out of the corner of his eye. That was nice. That was good. He appreciated it, to have company on days like this, to have company that didn’t constantly badger him about this or that. Phil let him be, as he always, always did.

For the most part.

“You drink a lot, back there?”

He took a moment to parse those words before he examined the wine glass again and took a swig. *Drinking* as in alcohol, he assumed- and it was once again the taste of whiskey in his mouth, wine stored in countless bottles in the utterly unnecessary wine cellar-esque room, various drinks mixed to perfection as soon as he reached an age of majority.

The crowds liked seeing him with drinks, for some reason. Even if the countless parents, faceless to him, weren’t the biggest fans of it. For some reason others found beauty there. Even more allure, apparently, when he was an adult and paired with a drink. Or younger, but that didn’t bear thinking on.

Not to mention alcohol at any fancy party. Endless amounts of champagne that none of them minded if minors stole a glass or two from, as long as they were discreet about it.

“A bit. Wine. Some whiskey.”

“Anything else?”

“...I don’t think champagne agreed with me, if that’s what you’re asking,” he said dryly, even as memories involving it appeared, rotten with age and contracts and Quartz employees and glamorous parties-

Phil huffed out a laugh.

“I guess that *is* what I was asking,” he said. Techno gave him a sideways glance. He was leaning forwards, forearms on his legs. He was looking out at the horizon, too, looking almost like he was biting the inside of his mouth as his arms gave an ever so slight tremble.

“You look stressed.”

Another laugh.

“You think, Techno? You think?”

Techno tilted his head at his brother curiously. Let his mouth frown slightly around the tusks, concerned in a way that he couldn’t describe.

“I’ve been stressed ever since I found out you were missing from fucking *anywhere*, Techno, and it hasn’t stopped since then with all of your- all of your stunts. All of your amnesia. All of your- your- your *everything!*”

“...Oh.”

“...Yeah, *oh.*”

Silence held. Techno took a sip and picked at his nails idly, turning his head away. Phil’s face in the corner of his vision went from stressed and almost angry to pausing, to grimacing, to looking away himself.

“...Sorry, Techno. I just...I. Shouldn’t just...shout that out, or anything. Fuck.”

“...It’s fine.”

“It’s not.”

And that was all there was to properly say about that, Techno supposed, even if they’d talk it out in a more ideal world. A world where conversations happened and actually got things done.

They didn’t talk for the rest of the morning.

It was— nice. Ish.

He wondered if his brothers wanted everything to be wrapped up in a bow, nice and neat, and for him to just fade back into who they once knew.

It wasn't a rare thought. Had never been one. It had, in fact, been once that he circled around to like clockwork to never find the answer that he thought he wanted.

But—all of them knew that it wasn't going to shake up that way. Even from before, there were things they had never known about him. Teach had never been a subject of much conversation—none, in fact—because they hadn't even realized that Techno was one of the few people who could stitch out thread enchantments. Or what friends he might have had in Hypixel.

But back there, in that crisp apartment, Tommy had walked in on him. Had seen the threads, the fabrics laid out, the embroidery hoop in his hand.

And now the apathy that had melted into that scenario was coming back to bite him in the ass.

"Hey, Techno? Where's that embroidery thingamajig?"

Techno let his eyes rise to examine his brother from he was kneeling on the ground, examining some of the potatoes in their small garden-turned farm. He watched his brother for a second or two before returning to what he was doing, considering the answer he was going to give. Had to give, he supposed.

Tommy wouldn't give it up. He *knew* that. But what could he say? Had Tommy recognized the fact that he was stitching runes into fabric? Realized that those runes were of a much more specialized nature compared to those bastardized symbols on armor and tools?

He chewed at his bottom lip as he pulled a few potatoes out of the ground and rose to his feet. Maybe if he just diverted it a little and let the course of the conversation shift-

"Hey! I'm *talking* to you, prick," Tommy snipped at him. Techno gave him a rather annoyed look. He pretended to not notice the relief that appeared to sag through Tommy at getting even a visual response.

Remnants from spacing out at Hypixel, he supposed. They had to be relieved that he didn't... yeah.

"*Techno*," Tommy whined, "just *tell* me, yeah?"

"...What embroidery hoop?"

You've gone and messed it up now, he thought mournfully—and Tommy was already on a roll against his vast, endless, unretractable mistake. *Lying to a kid with a nose for this stuff like a bloodhound.*

"The one you were—the one you were fuckin' holding in your shitty ass apartment! The one with all the weird stuff stitched in it! You have more of that shit, right? Where? Where can I look at it?"

His brother got as far into Techno's space as he seemed to dare. Techno glared tiredly at him before setting down a basket of potatoes and brushing off his hands on his pants.

"Nowhere," he said steadfastly. In for a penny, in for a pound, as the saying went. "I don't have anything like that." Nothing like the miscellaneous supplies in some nooks and crannies of his room there. Nothing like some of the bolts of fabric or items that he had stuffed into his suitcase and bags before leaving the other server. "I don't understand what you mean." He paused. "Nerd." There. That sealed it. Tommy'd leave him alone now.

"Don't call me a- a-“ Tommy withdrew and gave a bit of a growl, hands coming up to clutch at his head in irritation. “Don't act *dumb!* I just- I- what the fuck *was* that? You know what I'm talking about! The stupid rich people enchantment thing!”

He was a badger. He was a horrible badger that Techno hated but somehow still loved even with how much he wanted to throttle the life temporarily out of his brother because of how much he fucking *badgered him*.

“...Why.”

Why do you want to know. Why are you encroaching upon my privacy like that. Why do you still remember this. Why. Why. Why.

“Phil wants me to prove that you know shit about- uh- um.” And just like that, Tommy was shying away and not looking at him. Maybe it was because of the fact that Techno had begun to inch forward, the beginnings of a true anger stirring in his chest. “It's, uh, nothing! Just wanted to know! It's important, though, so you better-“

“If it's nothin',” he said dryly, staring at his younger brother, “you wouldn't say it's important, would you? Or talk about Phil at all?”

“...Well,” Tommy said.

Techno kept staring.

“You see.”

“Keep going, Tommy.”

“Just give it to me, okay?”

Enough pressure and he'd crack.

“Please?”

He would crack. He *would*.

“Just- ugh, you're such an ass, I'm just trying to see what the fuck you're hiding! We're trying to see what the fuck you're hiding so hard from us, okay? Last time you hid you fucking- you- *you-*“

“I what.”

“You went and fucking *disappeared on us* because you never let us into your fucking *farm* and all we could do was message you and you stopped responding and we stopped asking and- and- *stop fucking hiding things from us!* If they’re so important to you, or whatever! What the fuck!”

“...It’s not important.”

“Then why’re you trying to hide it like a little bitch, Techno?”

“It’s not. Important.”

“Yes it fucking is!”

“*Gods*, this is getting nowhere.”

Tommy froze. Techno froze. They both turned, much like moving statues, from where they had been increasingly in each other’s space to look at Phil. He stood a few lengths away, arms crossed as Wilbur stretched beside him. Techno turned burn a wordless question into Tommy’s head with a single gaze, no communicator needed.

Did you bring them here? Was this just a plot for me to say that I did thread en-

“Stop looking at me like that, Techno,” Tommy barked. “Shut up. Shut up.”

“...I said nothing.”

“*Both* of you,” Phil sighed, “just...stop.”

Tommy almost looked like steam was coming out of him, but he calmed much like a dog that was still silently pulling at a leash. Techno, next to him, minded his own business and eyed Phil with...not curiosity, but something between an accusation and an exhaustion that bordered his brother’s own.

So this really was a plot to catch him with something, huh.

“Tommy told us about some item or whatever the fuck that he saw back at your apartment in Hypixel,” Phil said matter-of-factly. Techno side-eyed his younger brother only to see a mulish expression on his face. *Of course.* “Fabric. Runes in thread on some kind of hoop.”

“Techno,” Wilbur said from Phil’s side, “your cloak- was that- did you-“

“Did you stitch your own enchantments into the cloak I made for you back then,” Phil asked, “or was it someone else that you hired with prize money to do so?”

Prize money? Who cared about *prize money*?

But they were all staring at him. They were all paying attention to the way he watched them back. Paying attention to how he shifted and how he spoke and how he breathed.

There was sweat beading on the back of his neck.

“So,” he said, valiant in his efforts and succeeding exactly not at all, “I do not know what stitching enchantments means. In fact, I do not think I know what enchanting is at all, and I have gotten amnesia, therefore I am in the ri-“

“Bullshit,” Wilbur called out, although there was a bit of a shit-eating grin on his face at the words. At least he had amused *someone* with that nonsense. “*Buuuuullshit.*”

“You can tell us,” Phil said, a hand coming up to pinch at the bridge of his nose. Techno hoped he wasn’t getting a headache from him- the way he posed, the way he stood, it all screamed of worry. Of stress. “Why wouldn’t you tell us before, though?”

Come to think of it, his other brothers gave off that vibe, too.

Last time you hid you fucking disappeared!

They were all concerned. For him.

Us thread enchanters get hunted down.

But having family know about it seemed to be a death knell from the wisps that he knew, even if he knew so much less about it than before. There were notebooks upon notebooks of details on the enchantments, he knew from osmosis, under floorboards and tucked where other bits of fabric and projects were.

Histories of others besides him were contained within research for runes. Lives that were hidden within the tapestry of an embroiderer’s life secretly crafting masterpieces for others and themselves.

Something as grand as high-class finery. Something as simple as a small sequence of hiding runes in a hoodie designed as merch for a figure dubbed the Blood God. *The Blade.*

“Please.” Phil’s eyes were hurting. Were watery, in some way. “I don’t want...I...is there something stopping you from telling us about it?”

His expression spoke leagues, even if Tommy and Wilbur appeared confused. Techno tasted words of recent and far-off conversations- the tang of recently breaking down over a call, talking of contracts in vague terms and being *trapped*. More recent conversations of alcohol and general feelings, of matters kept hidden and exposed.

You’ve always been a private person, Phil’s eyes said, *and we understand. But there are some parts of that that can’t continue from where they are now.*

He was well and truly trapped, wasn’t he? One side of the coin was a rejection and hurting the family he held dear, even if he didn’t have every single facet of them returned to his mind’s eye. The other was giving up a precious part of himself to satisfy worried curiosity, a worry that transcended regular respect for privacy.

“Techno.”

He closed his eyes.

“Techno,” Wilbur echoed sharply. “*Techno*.”

He opened them again.

“Please,” he said out loud, and he couldn’t even tell who he was pleading to. “Please.” *Please don’t make me. Please change the conversation. Please don’t corner me. I don’t want to talk about this. I don’t.*

They were silent.

Techno breathed in. He breathed out a second later, mourning for something he had never even completely remembered.

“Let’s go inside,” he said quietly. Defeated. Trying to distance himself from the conversation, from the day, from the world.

He failed on that point, at the very least.

They followed him in like little ducklings, neat and tidy and in a nice, organized row.

What a shame.

Chapter End Notes

these past few months have kicked my ass. i apologize.

xli. i'd love to tell you stories, but i can't remember how they went

Chapter Summary

A back against the wall. A thrum of panic along the guitar strings of the spine. Play with the concept of privacy and come out unsatisfied.

(Or: A man scrambles to keep what he can against his chest while the intruders peruse his past.)

Chapter Notes

[chapter title from "be nice to me" by the front bottoms]

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

There were benefits that came to knowing that '*Teach*' was someone who actually existed on paper, not in the realm of the mirage but very much in the legal world- in many ways, though, it changed nothing at all.

They still bickered over petty things, like Techno teasing him for always coming over all the time and never inviting him over (although that one perhaps stung a little more personally than he realized it once had). He'd cackle over Dream's shitty posture and the way that he seemed to try to take over whatever sort of a chair or sofa or bit of floor he was on. He'd poke and nudge and figure the man out, just as he had since the very start of their... mentorship? Friendship? Something of the sort. Not quite *that* familiar.

...Not quite that distant, either.

The other man would always shoot back, even if the target was occasionally missed in his efforts. Comments about his shoddy chicken-scratch, about his stupid wine cellar room, about his heritage, common amused ground mixed with the lowest of unintentional blows.

That last one always hurt, just a bit. At least shooting back a quip about his mask would make them both drop the thread of conversation for a time, circling around each other like two animals locked in an encounter, not leaving until both were too exhausted of the effort.

But, as always, it'd be picked up again at some point- whether in the same day or a point far away.

Whether they left on amicable, tense, or other terms.

Techno had to wonder at some point where the shoe would drop, after impersonal had become...not quite so.

“So I’m thinking about enchanting a fishing rod for my older sibling,” Techno mentioned, idly stretching in his training room and logging notes to his communicator (appointments, tournament schedules, the next year’s worth of his life decided by agents and investors and Quartz’s grubby hands right alongside notes about how alchemical theory influenced enchanting *and*) through wrist and finger movements in the air. A few yards away, Dream sat on the floor, fighting with a bolt of fabric that Techno occasionally examined from afar.

Neat, he thought absentmindedly as he stretched to the left, popped some of the bones in his hands as he flexed them together. Stretched the other way. A quartet sequence repeated over and over, a simple block chain that’s fine if it’s cut apart because it’s just a bunch of repeated sequences that can all stand apart, but which runes even are those-

“For your sibling,” Dream’s voice broke into his thoughts, and Techno glanced up a hair at his smiling mask. Today, he seemed the kind of thoughtful that spoke of a storm coming. Techno didn’t know if it was of the variety that indicated gentle rain or a hurricane. “A fishing rod, of all things? Why not send that to a regular engraver or have them do it themselves?”

“Because,” Techno said, dry as dust, “I want it to be a very good fishing rod. They fish a lot.”

“Nobody uses runes like ours on tools like fishing rods.”

“Does it matter?”

“It does when you’re trying to not get *trapped in something*, Techno.”

He raised his eyebrows at the unexpectedly vehement tone. He watched the man for a long second, huffed lightly, and gave a mild shrug. *Nothing could be worse than being with Quartz*, he thought, rather amused by the level of seriousness that Dream seemed to be trying to bring to the table.

“If they find it out,” Dream said- heated at Techno’s lackluster response- “they’ll talk about it to their friends. And their friends’ll talk about it to more people, and more and *more* because nobody just *knows* a thread enchanter, and then everyone and their mother knows and you’ll be watched by anyone who knows anything and has the money to do something about it, okay?”

Techno’s eyes started inching up his forehead.

“It’s only a step for people to go Oh, you must actually be a thread enchanter, aren’t you so silly by saying you bought it from a friend? Any chance I could get something a little special? Just because we’re such good friends?”

... Yeesh.

“And then you’ll be badgered by people, even the ones who don’t want to commission you, you know? *Wow, you must be so lucky. Who’re you working for this time? Why didn’t you tell us? Why, huh? What’re you doing, walking away? Huh? Huh?*”

The eyebrows went higher. There was something deeper than just...*being found out*, here. Dream’s voice was harsh. It was glacial, cracking long and slow down its length. He was watching the man almost vibrate out of his skin, and there was nothing much Techno could do to stop the train from chugging along, it seemed.

“And then, *oh*, you’re in some kind of special job now, and you have no time to go see your family because you have important work to do and everyone and anyone wants you to get better just so they can suck every little thing out of you and get their money’s worth from what they know and how can you even *fathom* that, *huh*, Techno? How *could* you?”

You sure know a lot about these kinds of situations for someone not in a contract with a group like Quartz, Dream, he thought mildly. Noted an appointment with Daybreak Daily News for the next week. Opened his mouth.

“This— this feels like too much infor-“

“How could you even *feel* about that! It’s almost like a contract without anything behind it, and what would *you* know about contracts, Techno?” Dream’s hands were gesticulating wildly. Techno watched them dance, almost entranced by the way that he seemed to be so caught up with himself that everything else was ignored—the air to the room, the way Techno had slowly come to a stop, the stillness of it all. Even the fabric being worked on was now resting aimlessly on the man’s lap. “What the fuck *would* you know about it? All you do is stitch and win tournaments and battles and look at a crowd that adores you and go back home and do it all again, you-“

Techno’s mostly bemused mood vanished into a void, replaced with the flat line of his mouth and an unimpressed stare.

“You’re *lucky*,” Dream hissed. “You’re *lucky*, Techno.”

...*Wow*.

For someone so smart, that’s an astounding display of ignorance of one’s surroundings, he thought. And then he just...quirked a crooked smile at Dream. Nothing more, nothing less.

“I sure am, Dream,” he said instead of the million- no, billion- other things he wanted to say in the silent trench between them. “I sure am.”

...And just like that, all the fight seemed to leave the other man.

Peel back the veil of anonymity, to some degree, and who do you get?

Someone just as flawed as him, it seems, with an even more glaring ability to, uh... completely miss some of the similarities between them.

Even as he never truly unveiled himself to begin with.

It didn't do much to make Techno feel anything more than a growing irritation at how... *bratty* his teacher seemed about it all.

Whatever. He wasn't about to fight with him. It would be useless. All the man probably had wanted to do was vent.

"I'll hide some concealment runes in it," Techno said with a smile that was barely anything at all. *Change the topic. Subvert expectations. Switch it up. There was no break between the previous mention of the rod. Nope.* "Maybe the unique one I cooked up. Their eyes'll just skip over it if they want to look at it. I just want to do something for my family, Dream." At no response, he walked a few steps closer and nudged the man lightly with a foot. He still just sat there, face held heavy in his hands. *Mask* held heavy in his hands. "Nerd."

"Not a nerd," Dream's voice muttered, peeking out from behind the mask and the hands it was held in. "Y're a nerd."

"Get up and prove it to me," he said dryly. "Quick spar before you get back to it. Best of three."

"...Anything on the line?"

"Of course not. Get up."

A huff. "Alright, Mr. *Privileged Blade*. I'll cater to your whims, huh?"

He rolled his eyes, but didn't rise to the bait. Didn't reveal the chasm of misunderstandings, the yawning chasm that felt as if it was just coming into proper view. "Just get a weapon. Get some blood running and all that."

"Fine, fine, geez-

As expected, the spar was lackluster. *Predictable.*

It left an odd taste in Techno's mouth as he stood there, two wins to Dream's zero, and watched the ever-smiling man go back to pushing a thread back and forth, seeming very much like he wasn't actually smiling at all.

Dark eyes blinked open with a flash of memory, a step sideways from reality. For a moment, the land, the porch, the rooms behind his brothers were cast in a pastel glaze before it solidified into its familiar vibrant hues.

His reckoning had come. Techno could feel it in the ache of his tusks, in the twitch of his ears, the flaring of his nostrils. Of course he was just imagining the smell of anger on the air. His nose wasn't *that* fine.

“I don’t really want to talk about it.”

“But you’re going to,” Wilbur interjected, eyebrows high on his face. “Come *on-*“

“Come on, fucker, just get out the fabric and shit! Chop chop!”

Techno closed his eyes for a second, prayed for a chance to be saved from absolute morons—as if that was anything nigh approaching realistic—and slipped into his room to fish items out of some of the caches he had remembered. Some notebooks were in his bag still, sure. Beneath this floorboard there was a small box with some threads and needles and other supplies in it. Behind all of the folded clothes in one drawer were bundles of fabric and completed garments, all in various processes of being worked on.

He held the artifacts of a past life in both of his hands. He considered all that rested upon them—breathed in and brought with it Teach, *Dream*, stories of bad endings and former teachers and consequences that lead to a slippery slope—and breathed out, thoughts drifting now to his family and hard-set, concerned gazes.

The hybrid carried his precious cargo and left, past where his siblings were all looking at him and his bounty with surprise—had they thought that what Tommy was talking about was a lie, or something? Did they not trust *Tommy*?—to sit down on the living room floor.

They followed.

What was there to explain? How did you meander through explaining years of learning and working, an oddly gifted hobby that could have very easily become a full time job instead of glue to fill the cracks of an unsteady existence, and piece a narrative together for them that you barely remembered on the worst of days and only somewhat recalled on the best?

He didn’t know how to do it, that was for sure.

But he could at least start with...with *something*.

Not at the beginning. The beginning was still something that he mulled over. Was it real? Was it changed through the passage of time? How could he say that any of it mattered besides the actual objects he had in front of him? How, why, who, it wasn’t his place to spill memories he didn’t entirely understand yet but—

But they were all staring at him.

“So,” he said after a long, long moment, the cloak he had been wearing when they confronted him heavy on his frame, “the, uh, cloak...the cloak was one of the first major pieces I completed.” He paused. “Towards the end of my apprenticeship. An, uh. Innovation?”

Instantly—

“Apprenticeship?”

“Innovation?”

“Wait, wait, apprenticeship from *who*? ”

They all kept talking over each other. They had all been leaning in when Techno exposed the underside of the garment so they could look at the delicate embroidery, the runes delicately all laid together in a smooth, flowing pattern. They probably didn’t even notice the painstaking attention to detail, did they? Didn’t notice the history in it, or the slight mistakes, or—

A wonky rune passed by his eye, the lines of a rune ever so slightly *off*.

Ah. He didn’t remember doing that.

Techno’s mouth curled downwards, sharp and discontent with it all.

He waited until they were quiet before clearing his throat.

“I don’t think I intended to...do *this*. ” He scrunched up his face. *That isn’t quite right.* “Do, uh...the whole. Embroidery thing. Or whatever.”

They quieted.

They wanted a story, and he didn’t know how to give it to them.

“Someone approached me,” he said very simply, “outside of my...responsibilities at Hypixel. Years ago, now, somewhere around the time...I got my first apartment, maybe? And they offered me the chance to learn something.”

A quirk of the mouth, upwards instead of down. He looked at that scarlet stitching on the cloak and tried to feel anything other than a deep sense of longing. Longing for the time when he wanted to learn new things. Longing for the time when he didn’t even know who Teach was, and a time in which his brothers had never met Dream to go to his server. Longing for that ignorance that had lingered over him in a fog for weeks upon weeks upon weeks before he had been found by Phil.

Even now, he half-wanted that. It had just been...easy. Easy to sink into that apathy.

Techno couldn’t do that now, he knew, but— still.

He was tired.

“I took it.”

“But- but why wouldn’t you tell us, Techno?”

He ran a thumb over the embroidery and breathed in, out. In, out. Phil was only hurt because he had never told them about it before going MIA. They all wanted to know parts of him that had been kept private before in an effort to figure out what pieces of the picture they had missed.

How did it matter when he didn’t have so many of those pieces of himself right there, either?

“...Because you would tell other people if I told you, back then.” Silence. *You still might.* “And if a lot of people know of an embroidery enchanter, they don’t get peace for the rest of their life.” He let his thumb stroke the fabric. “Or...that’s what I think I know. I think others got killed.”

And *there* was the noise.

Techno closed his eyes and failed to get swept away. They were only the consequences of him not having told them earlier. That was it. That had to be it. That was *all*.

But there were so many things they just didn’t *know*. And so many things that, even half-remembered, he would only tell them under duress. Further duress.

Or, rather, when they wouldn’t freak out over it.

Right now, they were all very much freaking out.

He opened his eyes, considered everything he had brought into the living room with him, and just kept breathing. Picked up an embroidery hoop and slid some fabric into it, half-finished and sparking just enough memory to know what he had been planning to do with it.

A thread. A needle.

If nothing, he could at least get some work done while they tried and probably failed to grill him on anything.

If nothing, Techno supposed, he could let his hands drift while his mind worked.

That was fine.

It was all fine.

They’ll tire themselves out eventually, his mind whispered to him. *Hopefully.*

Hopefully.

(“Fine! Well, Techno-”

“Techno?”

“He’s fuckin’ doin’ the, uh, that shit again, hey, Techno-”

Ugh.)

He could slip back into that fog for another moment, surely.

A figure sat beside him on the docks. Techno let his legs swing aimlessly, angrily, and tried to figure out at what point anger became fury. Or, rather, the point at which things started to make sense.

“...It was just so that we knew that you weren’t, well— hiding anything important from us.” the person said, and he identified them as Phil with a downwards tilt of his lips. “Techno, really— we’re worried, okay? And we can’t...we can’t lose you again.”

They both looked out over the water. He could see a bird skimming the surface of it as if searching for something before it banked up and away onto solitary banks of wind.

“That was private,” he said flatly, quietly. There was something beyond anger that was curdling in his chest. It was quiet, it was soft. It wasn’t a monster that lurked in the night, waiting to pounce.

It was just the feeling of betrayal.

“That was *private*,” Techno repeated to Phil, and clenched his fists from where they sat in his lap. The words were hard to come past the wall of complicated anger, and he let out a hissing breath towards the direction of the horizon. He brought his hands up a second later to cover his face.

He breathed.

Phil seemed to have nothing to say. He didn’t look at the man.

“You’re not—“ He breathed in, squared his shoulders, and tried to not feel like a soldier going to war. “You’re not respecting my privacy,” he said, firm even with the way his heart wavered. He cared for his siblings. They were his motives. They were his rocks, his anchors in the unsteady waters.

But rocks and anchors could be wrong, even if they weren’t typically sentient creatures.

“I want to keep...some things.” Techno huffed. “You have...things that you do not tell anyone. Wilbur. Tommy. All of you. Even if it is important. The...the enchanting did not... was not related to the island. Or to you. Or to...to here.”

He glanced over at Phil to find him looking out at the horizon as well, a stillness to the flat line of his lips.

“It was...*wasn’t*,” Techno said with a thread of desperation appearing. Why didn’t they *get it*? Why couldn’t they understand the words that took him a few seconds longer to get, or that took longer to mouth around? Why was it as if the moment he talked logic, he became nigh incomprehensible to them?

“There are things that I...will not tell you about. No matter what.” He saw Phil’s start at that, alright. “Even if they are important to...to who I think I am. I will tell you what I want to.” He let that sink in for a few seconds. “I will tell you what I want to and. Nothing more.”

Phil exhaled sharply, an almost whistling note that had his ears turning down at the sound. Techno stopped looking at him.

They sat like that for whoever knew how long. He didn't bother to check the communicator that refused to pay rent for the space in the back of his mind. He didn't need it.

"...We pressed you too far. *Tommy* pressed you too far," Phil acknowledged. "He's...he's a kid. I guess we all get that, though. But can't we be concerned about you? Can't you let us figure out how to help you? Why would we tell anyone about it?"

"Only a matter of time before *Tommy* slips. Or Wilbur. To any of their friends." Techno could sense how Phil turned to him, the shifting of his body on the dock, the air that brushed against him in the lightest of whispers. "They still have another server to go back to, after all," he said dully. "The one that they're supposed to have all those friends in."

His words had barely slurred throughout the conversation until now. Minor victories, he supposed.

"But--"

"And I'm just the...the...the amnesiac taking up space in your private server. The amne, amnesiac who used to be someone you all...thought you knew. Even if everyone has...a private self. I'm the *same*, Phil," he pleaded, even though he imagined that his words were falling on deaf ears. He hadn't really listened to variants of this before and took them to heart, not fully. He still remembered the spiders he had been lured to fight. Still remembered the satisfying feeling of punching Phil in the face after everything had been said and done. Phil was kind, and he was brotherly and strong and there but he could fail just as anyone else could. He just chose to fail in really, truly *listening*. "I am."

"Techno..."

"I'm just the person who still can't remember as much as they want to about the person you remember," he said, and oh, he was heated now, not a raging flame but instead water at a rolling boil, bubbling quietly in anger. "I have things I want to keep too, though, and remembering doesn't mean that I'll give it all up. Going there was personal, Phil. I-I could have made it easier by not going, right? By not going and not remembering as much unless I threw myself into dangerous situations?"

Phil was silent. Techno kept rolling, rolling, rolling on. "You guys have things that you keep to yourselves. But I don't want to talk about one thing and it's a whole- a whole fight. Can't I have one thing? Am I just the Techno of the past to you but with all the secrets open, huh? And if *Tommy* or *Wilbur* tell their friends about what I can do they'll all have assumptions of me and I don't want to be bothered."

He breathed in raggedly. Out roughly. Long gone were the simpler times, swept out to be replaced by rolling currents and hissing rapids. He was the raging river, was the storm, and there was no way out of the clenching of his chest and the snarl gracing his lips. "I hadn't wanted to be *bothered*, on that island," he exhaled, refusing to look over at Phil. No. He didn't want to see his face as he spoke, a tapestry of hurt and pain and guilt that was

absolutely, absolutely warranted in his opinion. “So maybe you should have just *left me there*, Phil. Maybe I’d be all the happier for it, without you three.”

“...Techno.”

He couldn’t help but laugh into his hands, laughed quietly and brokenly as he hunched over and let his hair spill down while he tried not to shatter for the millionth time since being dragged out of that fucking *island*. Maybe he could have just farmed potatoes for eternity. Morals and memories and secrets wouldn’t’ve mattered there, even if he never remembered his family. Even if the stars in his sky never shone again in his vision. Even if the server had winked out of existence.

“...You don’t mean that.”

A small chuckle after left him after he was done, devoid of humor. He looked down at the water. Up at the horizon, at the melted crayon kind of sky. Techno just...couldn’t help the way his teeth bared themselves for a half-second before he sighed. “I don’t,” he said faintly, hands coming down so he could rest his arms on his legs. So he could lean forward. “I don’t mean that at all. I think.”

He thought.

It wasn’t a satisfactory answer to either of them. Techno...he knew he wouldn’t go back there, even if he could. But the thought was tempting. The bliss that not knowing would provide, just like the self-destructive behavior over in Hypixel- that would never *not* be tempting, he knew.

And yet he was here.

Sitting.

Talking with Phil.

“They found me,” he said with more detail than before, picking over what he could remember with a tired, put-upon smile. Phil gave a surprised look before realizing that he had slid the conversation back, right back to when they had been inside the house. “They found me and offered me a chance to do something else than sit there and give looks for photoshoots and press conferences and battles. And I took it. And it was...it was good.” He huffed out one last tired laugh. “It was good,” Techno murmured. “I learned a lot, and my mentor, my teacher ended up as a good friend. It was nice to have someone there. Someone to talk to.”

“...Have you talked with them at all recently?”

“No.”

“...What were they like, Techno? Your teacher?”

That smile grew crooked. “They were a friend,” he said rather simply, trying to pick out the words that best suited. “A bit...oblivious to certain things.” To matters of wealth. To skill in areas besides embroidery and rune knowledge. To class differences and government and

exactly what went into being a major name in Hypixel's arenas, for some reason, even if he ranted on emotions that Techno knew all too well. "A bit arrogant. But they were...kind. Humorous. Skilled." He wrung his hands out and gave a mild hum. "...A nerd, I guess."

"A nerd."

"A nerd," he agreed, leaning a bit more forwards. If he looked just right, his reflection in the water could be bordered by splashes of gentle gradients.

And then Phil leaned forwards, too, and he could see the man staring at his reflection, and in turn at his own eyes that looked to Phil's reflection.

"...Any chance I could meet them?"

"No," he said, and tilted his head to see what that'd do with the lighting. It played out over his face gently. He found himself oddly disappointed with that fact. "...It's complicated." If *complicated* meant that Dream was running a server that had Wilbur and Tommy as regular participants and was getting into things like wars, murder, and violence alongside politics. "After all, I haven't even messaged them."

"Maybe you should."

"Maybe." Techno sighed. "Just...not today."

"I'll try to get Tommy and Wil to not...be like that. It was uncalled for. I get that, I think." Out of the corner of his eye in the water, he could see Phil raise a hand to rub at his eyes in a slow motion. "They're just. Worried. And I'll try to not...not be the same."

"That's not a good enough excuse."

Phil hummed. Techno huffed.

"...I'll try, at least. On my part and on theirs."

"They're the ones that need'ta do some apologizing, just like you."

"I...I know."

"Good."

They spent the moment in a pensive kind of silence, watching the water move, watching each other watch the water move as the skies turned.

See, this was why he liked Phil, even after lines had been crossed. Phil at least tried to not push too hard, unlike his other brothers. He would push until he felt uncomfortable and then just...leave it. Which was fine. It was good, in fact, even if it made him want to shout because Phil *still* somehow didn't know where that *line in the sand was even after it had been drawn, come on, come ON—*

He just wished his other brothers would do the same.

For once, Phil was the first one to walk away.

Techno wondered why he wasn't glad for that fact.

Chapter End Notes

i'm not sure i'll be satisfied with this story, especially this section, but it's good enough.
i'll do what i can.

it's been a bit over a year since i first posted this! my relationship with the work
underlying this one (dsmp, minecraft youtube, etc) has changed, but this holds a special
place in my heart. it'll take a while but this'll be finished.

have a great thanksgiving and holiday season! or if you don't participate in it, have a
great rest of the year. i'll try to update before the end of the year but i can't promise
anything!

the unedited "good bit"

Chapter Summary

the good bits of what i wrote for the rest of the fic last year, in the summer of 2021.

Chapter Notes

hey. considering news...i don't think i'll ever be able to muster up the will to edit this and write a whole new ending. this chapter is what i considered salvageable about a year ago when i actually wrote it, and the next chapter is the "ending" that i didn't really like. perhaps there's a better ending, but you better make it up in your own mind. this feels a little in bad taste but i think i'd feel worse if i never posted it.

this chapter is of noticeably worse quality, being unedited. it would probably double in size if i edited it. sorry. no italics for thoughts or emphasis, no bolding, whatever. sorry if the spacing is fucked up- and i have absolutely no clue if i threw notes in there. have fun if you find them!

there's a weird subplot with schlatt that my hands wrote and never wrapped up. sorry about it. and the typos i'm leaving. yeah. and with the ending of the next chapter, yeesh.

this chapter is NOT an ending, just to clarify for some. i had planned to rewrite portions after this. the next chapter is the ending i had scrapped.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“Techno! Hey, hey Techno!”

“I’m not answering any questions about embroidery enchantments, runes, or anything I remembered in the past,” he said smoothly, still as a rock as he stood at his post. An axe was held in his hands, loose and easy to swing, and he watched for the mobs that should be coming out soon, just as the night was falling.

“The other day-“

“I said,” Techno murmured, voice embedded with steel, “that I will not answer any questions about that.”

“It’s not a question.” Almost like an afterthought: “Bitch.”

Techno turned his head ever so slightly to catch Tommy in his vision, holding a sword in his hands and looking like he had just eaten a lemon. It was a curious thing to watch, Tommy just...stand there, somewhat demure, somewhat angry at whatever was going on in his head.

“What is it.”

“I’m sorry, okay? I guess I was the real bitch instead of you and I didn’t fucking know what you were doing and I wanted to tell them. Phil says I should have asked you first or some shit, I don’t get it. But it’s- that’s- I didn’t know you did that! Or that someone taught you! For all I knew it was a fucking, uh, piglin thing!”

“Definitely not a piglin thing,” he said dryly, parsing through the faint things he remembered about his time in a land of dry heat and lava and piglins. “They don’t do runes. They do a lot of...of...” What was the term again? How could he possibly describe it? “A lot of things with superstition,” he finally said. “But...nothing that works.”

“Then where did you- no questions, right,” Tommy said, laughing rather oddly when Techno flicked his eyes back towards his brother. “Right. I, uh, came to help. Phil got all weird when I said you were out here alone.”

“Of course he was.”

The silence they stood in was awkward, at best. Techno didn’t entirely mind it. He knew that Tommy was horrible at words and even worse at apologies, even if the one he had just done wasn’t the worst in the world for him. He knew, in some way, that Tommy was all bluster. He just had to give it a moment. Maybe two.

When Tommy clambered over the fence he was standing by just to sit on it, a somewhat amusing mimicry of Phil from nights ago, Techno spoke again.

“You should have asked me first,” he finally said after a moment to think on it. “You should have. It’s...” He sighed, long and tired, and resigned himself to doing at least a bit of talking about embroidery enchantments. “It’s dangerous.”

“Dangerous? What the fuck?”

“...Talkin’ about it.” He looked down at the axe in his hands and up at the treeline. There was a zombie there, ambling down towards them. He didn’t exactly feel like chasing them down tonight, so them coming to him would have to do. The axe in his hands gleamed, shone, sparkled in the moonlight. “...It has a reputation. Even you’ve heard of it.”

“Because it’s expensive as fuck,” Tommy hissed. “And nobody knows anyone who does it and it’s only rich people that get it, the assholes, and you got us that stuff that one day and I thought you were just rich but you made it, what the fuck, that’s so weird, you gotta make us mo-“

“Exactly,” Techno said with a vehemence, silencing Tommy with just his tone. “People know and they want you to do more. And they badger you. And they tell other people. And it’s expensive and with the wrong people who know that can be dangerous. People can...can die

because others know. Because they get caught at the wrong time, and encounter someone who knows in the wrong place.”

...That had been the most he had spoken to Tommy in one stretch at a time. Techno grimaced and focused again on the zombie. It was a good length away, still, although he hefted his axe in preparation.

“It’s dangerous,” he repeated when Tommy said nothing. “And it has a reputation. And people will try to do anything to get something like that for as cheap as possible. That’s why everyone who does it is anonymous.”

He thought of Dream- with his mask, with that smile, to everyone during the battle and to him even when they were in the same room. Thought of the level of fear and caution someone would need to always wear a mask no matter what, and the need for privacy that it entailed.

He thought of Dream- not Teach, but just Dream- and his oblivious words, his anger and stress and things that he had thought Techno wouldn’t understand, for some reason. The different sides they viewed the enchantments from, so similar but seemingly so different because....because....it didn’t seem like Dream had ever truly participated in the battles of Hypixel on more than the scale of strictly a competitor. Had never been signed, not really, not by any of the big companies. Not by Quartz or Sinea or anyone. And he still knew what a similar kind of pressure was like.

“And it’s only made worse,” Techno said, “if other people already know who you are.” His lips turned up ever so slightly. “Like if you were a superstar in combat on one of the biggest hubs in any of the nearby spheres.”

“...Oh.”

He gave it a second.

“...Oh.”

“Yeah, oh,” Techno said, and sighed. He stepped forward and held his axe out, ran forward a few paces, lifted his arms-

And that was one mob down out of many more to come. He could already see another at the forest’s edge, and thought he could see the faintest glow of a skeleton’s core from deeper in.

“It’s not to be rude,” he said. “It’s because it could be dangerous.”

“...Fuck.”

“Just don’t tell anyone,” he murmured after he stepped back, closer to the fence that Tommy still sat on. “Alright?”

“...Alright.”

“Good.”

At least even a teenager like Tommy could be taught something so important.

There was a restlessness to Tommy and Wilbur both that could easily be picked up on, starting just a few days after they got back. Even with the whole thread enchantment fiasco, even with worries and bickering and anything else, it was easily apparent that they were champing at the bit for...something.

He thought he knew what it was about.

Techno stood still, stood quietly by a closed door and heard snippets of them talking about revolution, about bitterness at a loss, about Schlatt (whiskey and half-remembered nights shared with a drink, not friends but something similar) and Dream (Teach, Teach, his friend, his friend he still hasn't talked with since the incident-) and elections gone wrong.

About a place called Pogtopia.

It begged the question, though, as to how much Phil exactly knew about it. About their endeavor, about their failures and successes and all the stuff that Techno still didn't know a whole lot about.

"Oh, that server they're in?" When asked, Phil seemed rather amused as they stood side by side, Phil using the vegetables that Techno was chopping and giving to him. "I think it's fun. Good on them and all. They're having a lot of fun, revolutions and elections and all that, side projects and all, a new revolution..."

What exactly had Phil been told? Had he been told about death? About the exact oddities of the server? He had talked with him about it once, right?

"Well," Phil hummed, "Someone in there knows how to admin well, I guess. Maybe not the person who says he made it, but it helps them to not really die to mobs. Gotta stay safe. They'll have their spats, and..."

Ah.

So they had lied, either straight up or by omission, and all the things that Techno had already shared with him about it were at least somewhat skewed.

When he brought up his concerns...somehow, Phil at least took them seriously. Techno hadn't said anything about murder, but- hadn't they said something about revolutions?

"Yeah, mate, like..." Phil hummed when they talked about it, waving about a piece of carrot as if to demonstrate some nebulous kind of concepts. "Revolutions. Like a game. And they wanted you in on it and all."

"The way they talked about it to me," Techno said mildly, "it seemed a lot more serious than a game. They both died once or twice at some point, and not like in Hypixel. And it's weird that a server like that can revive people."

"...You know. You're right."

Techno rolled his eyes and passed him some more vegetables. He got to work cutting some more a bit more precisely. "Only the big hubs can respawn," he murmured. "Not enough of the admins that can do that to support anything else. Poach the talent and all. Gotta keep... server growth. And keep the admins coming in."

He didn't think he had ever seen such an admin. They weren't the ones that talked with others. They were the ones that always had a hand on the heartbeat of a server, the ones that frantically made it tick, the backend developers to the regular admins that actually conversed with people. Like...like Simon.

Techno thought he knew at least a bit by memory osmosis, or something like that.

"I am- concerned," he said, rather halting, "about...that." He looked away from Phil, mouth curved sharply into a frown. "It is strange. They have...feelings about their deaths. It stuck with them." A rumble started in his chest, low and angry and not quite keening but something much quieter than that. "And they did not tell you."

"...They didn't. But...secrets, I guess, Techno. Like you were telling me. Everyone has their secrets."

"But that kind of a secret can actually harm them," he murmured, "if it stays kept."

They continued to work in silence.

At least- at the very least- he had gotten Phil's mind considering the topic. He had gotten Phil to think on it and consider it and muse about it at least a bit, even if he didn't approach their brothers about it.

It didn't matter.

He, at the very least, had a few questions he wanted to ask them about...about Dream's server.

About where his former friend now was, a conflicting enigma in his mind's eye.

His brothers were getting antsy and that was the whole reason why, the whole root of it, the very beginning.

They wanted to leave.

Techno wondered if they'd want him to go with them.

...Only one way to find out, right?

Well. He wasn't about to constantly eavesdrop on them all. He was already one to speak about privacy, he supposed. But...he watched. He watched them steal away, watched them glance at Phil, glance at him, hunch over their communicators and over notebooks and over loose sheets of paper.

He watched until Wilbur approached him at dawn as he worked on his garden, weeding it while Wil came in from his night's watch.

"How're you doing, Techno?"

He eyed his brother- bow in hand, seemingly not having to do anything but shoot down mobs all night. He considered his hair, tossed by the wind. Examined the oddly hard set to his eyes and the way that his brother seemed to be examining him in turn.

"Alright," he responded, at least somewhat mildly. "...Farming."

"I see."

He stood there, as if that was all Techno needed to want to talk more and figure out things, as if that was all that was needed for Techno to ask something of Wilbur. Too bad for him, he didn't particularly feel like it. An early morning was afforded to him thanks to nightmares and, well. He didn't want to say what was coming first to his mind, the layers to his vision, death and blood and the Blade and Dream standing over his brothers and-

"Potatoes," Techno finally added on with a shrug. "...Nothin' much."

Wilbur stared at him.

He stared back, for a good moment or two, and went back to dutifully weeding out some of the area, checking up on it all. One of the varieties, he thought, should be ready for harvest. A hardy type, but delicious. Firmer but more filling for it.

"What're you going to do now? Now that you're back and you've remembered a lot and you're doing things?"

He supposed this conversation would come sooner rather than later. Especially from Wilbur, who seemed almost even more eager to return to Dream's world. Some switch had been flipped from caring wholly about his family to obsessing again over a world by friends.

Techno at least appeared to consider his words, humming along and trying to figure out what to say. "...Stay here, probably," he said after a long moment. "...Farm some. Visit other places. Don't know."

Ah. That was the wrong answer, to Wilbur.

"You know," he said, in a lighthearted tone that almost fooled Techno if he hadn't been looking for it, "Tommy and I are looking for someone else to join us in Pogtopia. You know, revolution against the leaders put wrongly in office."

...Hadn't he lost the election? Or were his memories really just that bad?

He squinted harder at Wilbur as if trying to figure out what he was saying. It was...hard, though, to get much that was concrete. His smile was solid. Nothing wavered. But...he didn't know. Maybe the matter weighed heavily on Wilbur now that he was in the frame of mind to actually think about it more.

"I don't think I'm much of a person for revolution, right now," he murmured. "I'd rather help out Phil. He seemed...lonely." Techno paused. "Seems lonely," he corrected, because Phil had almost seemed clingy ever since he got home. Maybe it was all the time of them being so close yet so, so far. Maybe it was the fact that before that point it had been rare for any of them to actually come home, especially all at once.

He definitely thought Phil was lonely.

"Phil's fine," Wilbur said with a wave of the hand. "Is it just because you don't want to fight? We won't make you, or anything. I get it. Hypixel probably burnt you out on it."

There was a fundamental misunderstanding right there, Techno mused, on the reasons Wilbur thought he didn't want to do something. They had different priorities. If his memories were alright, they had always had...iffy diverging paths, of a sort. He remembered days of bickering and pushing at each other and no compromise that made anybody happy at all.

Wilbur thought he didn't like fighting because he was burnt out, despite all the evidence to the contrary. It was less that and more that he had never liked fighting from the start. More that he had never wanted to consume it, never wanted to gorge himself on blood and gore and violence beyond the Nether.

He had wanted a challenge. And only a rare competitor had ever given him one of those.

Dream, he thought. Teach. Others. Philza, even, growing up- although the man liked to truly fight even less than he did.

There was the sport of it, just like he had tried to communicate to Phil, and then there was what Wilbur thought he liked- crushing people under foot.

"I want to keep Phil company," he said resolutely. He looked up to stare Wilbur in the eye and watch as his mouth turned downwards. His own words were stilted, too tired to care as long as his point was clear, and his ears turned ever so slightly downwards. "I want to keep him company," he repeated, "and only fight the mobs here. I do not want to be a part of... of...of revolution."

Silence.

"Why?"

Oh. Wilbur was breaking in some small way at that admission. He was hurt and he didn't want anyone to see it but Techno thought that, if he had gained anything by osmosis, that he could at least read some of the tells of his brothers. He was hurt and he was frustrated and he wanted something so greatly that anyone with eyeballs could see.

"It could be the three of us," Wilbur said, and his mouth was in a flat line, now. Techno looked away. "Me and you and Tommy, and we could message Phil, we could call, we could write. And he'd be happy as long as we're all happy."

"You don't know that."

“I know my brother.”

Maybe you don’t, his mind hissed, traitorous and harsh, and he refused to look into his brother’s eyes again for fear of that sentiment being transmitted over. The conversation as dawn rose was one he didn’t want to have. He was walking on eggshells that he could barely tell the boundaries of. He was trying to not crack Wilbur’s surface even more.

“We have to go back soon.” Wilbur’s voice cut through the silence, padded by nature as it was. He heard the sound of a bow being slung onto a back. “Me and Tommy. We’ve left it too long, and Tubbo...hasn’t been sending Tommy too many messages.” A pause. “Maybe Schlatt’s gotten to him.”

“I don’t see why that’s a bad thing,” he said tiredly. “Wilbur.”

“...Techno.”

He would not look up at that. He would not.

“Techno, of course it’s a fucking bad thing, he’s our damned rival and Tubbo’s in L’manburg or Manburg or whatever the fuck territory and he can only be our spy if he trusts us and wants to help us! What if Schlatt has him over on his side!”

“I don’t see why Schlatt himself is a terrible thing,” Techno said firmly, “besides. Besides being a part of a government. Does it. Hmm.” He took a deep breath and tried to fish for what to say. “I do not see why government matters. As long as you are with family or friends. Why does the government matter.”

“Techno-“ A hiss. If he was looking over, he’d bet Wilbur would be pulling out his hair. “You don’t understand,” Wilbur said, faint and distant. “Of course you don’t understand. Why would you?”

His own hands were covered in dirt. It wasn’t quite mud, but there was bits of dirt flecks on him, weeds in one hand from where he had been pulling them out. There was dirt under his nails and his palms were sore from washing them as much as he could in the nights, weeks prior. There was a soreness to them that made him breathe deeply in and he thought, almost, in some way- perhaps it didn’t matter what Wilbur thought of him. He had the land and he had this server and he had Phil to back him up, even if Phil didn’t actually know all that much about what their brothers were trying to do.

“I don’t get why government matters,” he said again, wording it a bit more firmly this time. “Server is for friends. They’re your friends. Schlatt. The others. Tubbo. Dream.”

“Schlatt and Dream aren’t my fucking friends,” Wilbur hissed. “They’re dirty rotten- they’re- they don’t deserve to be called that, Techno. Don’t take their fucking side.”

Why did sides have to be taken?

“...Why did you join, then?” He started to properly busy himself again with pulling weeds, biting softly at the inside of his lip as he did so. If he looked up, he’d probably draw blood

even if none of his teeth but his tusks were remotely sharp. If he looked up he'd do or say something that he would regret. "You and Tommy?"

"Because of our friends," he said, and huffed. "Not because of Dream. Even if Dream was-fine, at first. But he wasn't our friend."

He didn't voice the question at the back of his head, though: Why did it get so serious in the first place? What really happened? What are all the sides of the conflict? You can leave at any time, so why does it matter so much that you go back and fight something through?

Why do you seem, when talking about this place, the epitome of the siblings I remember in that past self's life while at the same time being the furthest thing away from those I remember?

...It was a moot point, really.

He doubted Wilbur would give him the answer he wanted, the answer he needed, whatever.

But there was something there. He had guessed it. Something even deeper ran under the surface and he had to figure out what it was.

It wasn't his problem, though, not really.

He didn't have to concern himself with what his brothers did. In all honesty, they were their own people and they could do what they wanted, whether it was music and being annoying or music and...being annoying somewhere else. But it put a bitter taste in Techno's mouth.

He shouldn't concern himself with it all. He had himself to find. He had his own works to do, but- but he felt like he almost owed it to who he was before to follow through and find his own even footing with those he had known before. His brothers, obviously. Dream, definitely. Maybe even Schlatt, although he only had a handful of memories about the man.

But...it just...he had to do something.

Sort of.

But what could he do? If he talked about Dream, about his memories regarding the man, he didn't think they would take it very well. But he didn't exactly want to go to that land specifically to help their revolution.

Could he not be a side party? Could he not watch and talk with everyone and take no sides, just like some countries in historical worlds all across the spheres? People fought. Strife happened. But some just...refused to participate.

Like Phil. (Almost.)

It sounded nice.

"I don't want to fight for you," Techno said. He brought himself up to his feet so he could survey the row of potatoes and other plants he had been examining. He scratched lightly at

the skin of his arms. Picked idly at the dirt underneath his fingernails. “I don’t.”

“But I told you that you could-“

“I don’t want to take part in a revolution,” he said soon after, turning away from Wilbur to frown to himself, to cross his arms and look further up as the sun kept painting them in gradually warmer and warmer tones. “I could visit, Wilbur. Would that...make you happy?”

“Never mind. I said never mind,” Wilbur snapped when he turned around slightly, casting a hard glance at him. “It doesn’t matter. Tommy’ll be happy when I tell him that, huh? Schlatt allowed to run wild in the land that he stole from us and we can’t even get any help with it.

He wanted to help them. He wanted to help them to survive, maybe. Make sure they were well fed. But there was a desperation in Wilbur’s eyes that shouldn’t be there, that didn’t belong, and Techno knew now more than ever that it was probably for the best that he had been stuck in that subworld when Wilbur and Tommy had requested his help. It was probably- most definitely- for the best.

He wondered what that said about him.

About them.

About how much it mattered.

“I’m going inside,” he murmured, “and making breakfast. Do you want anything, Wilbur?”

Wilbur stared at him. After a moment, he started to stare fully back, trying to convey the feeling that, at least this early in the morning, that he would not be standing for any more tricks that he wanted to pull.

Still, more silence.

“I’ll make breakfast for four, then.” He turned, uncaring of the way that Wilbur started to step after him, mouth opening silently. “...See you or not, I guess.” He shrugged and left Wilbur to stand there. Left him to wonder. Left him to think.

He doubted it did him any good at all.

“You do anything interesting lately, honeybuns, oh Blade?”

Techno rolled his eyes and moved away from the arm that tried to land on his shoulder, standing at his own counter with a shaker in one hand and a bottle of alcohol in the other. He poured it, mixed liqueurs in, mixed his own drink up- and poured it with a patience that seemed to irritate the man next to him.

“I said, sweetcheeks-“

“Call me a pet name again,” Techno said patiently, “and you can leave and never come back, Schlatt.”

“That’s J. Schlatt to you, Mister-“

“Careful.”

“Mister....Blade.”

“...Thin ice.”

There was an art to associating with others when you didn’t know their full intentions. He only had so much to go off of. One, he was a fellow hybrid, which was rare in the upper echelons of Hypixel’s society, in its general sphere of influence on the wider world. Two, he was in business. There were products made. There were unborn promises in his eyes and a look that meant he could slide in with the other ‘schmucks’, as he’d so kindly called the other entrepreneurs back then, seamlessly.

Third, he was a bit of a dick.

Techno had learned the art of seeming simultaneously like a pushover and someone to not fuck with. He held himself carefully, kept control, made sure that he seemed like he knew every inch of his body and how to lethalize it (which he did). He didn’t let Schlatt, who was lower on the social chain than him, try to do anything he didn’t want him to do.

He also treated the man with respect.

Work talk, at least the kind that was productive, was best when everyone was settled for it. He refused to talk work, refused to do anything that strong in a conversation until they were seated on opposite sides of a coffee table, Techno in a firm but soft chair that he preferred and Schlatt in something similar.

He wouldn’t disrespect him with one of the stiff chairs. That wouldn’t make anything either of them wanted happen.

“You have a business,” Techno started out, taking a slow drink and measuring his guest’s demeanor. His posture. Schlatt slouched a bit, almost as if he was trying to pay an homage to his somewhat sleazy behavior before- but it seemed to be a front, which didn’t surprise him. His drink was held loosely in one hand, and he hummed and sipped at it shortly afterwards, shrewd eyes staring back at Techno and, presumably, analyzing him in turn. He would find nothing but a posture beaten into him with disdainful words and photoshoot organizers correcting his sitting posture until he could never get it wrong. “Doing...”

“Developing and marketing cryptocurrency,” he said in answer, and Techno couldn’t help his eyebrows slowly shooting up at the remark. “I know, I know- it’s a long shot, considering the whole array that we have today, eh? But I don’t need it to function strictly as a currency, hon-Blade. There’s a game to be played there like how crypto was when it all started back in the original worlds that people forgot about, eh?”

His eyebrows were arching even higher. “Crypto’s a pretty locked in game at this point,” Techno said, a mild murmur. Another slow, slow sip before he sat down the glass on the table in front of him. “I don’t see why you’d approach me about a venture so different than the...”

He hummed, waved a hand as if trying to search for a word, even though he knew what he'd say. "The norm."

"That they push on you, huh?"

Techno tilted his head, dipped it just a little. Make of that what you will.

Schlatt barked out a bit of laughter and tossed his head back. Truly, he looked like a salesman that Techno would have never approached if he hadn't given him a few nods in advance, a few divergences from others who looked just like him. The same body language, the same laugh, the same tendencies. At least he seemed to know how to market himself well, Techno supposed.

"Figures," he wheezes out, and Techno's eyebrows reach their peak and refuse to return back down to where they usually rest. "Like, not like much real good ol' paper currencies are used anymore, but not like any given currency is backed by something material anymore, huh? No, it's all crypto."

"I'm not exactly the right person to talk to about it," Techno hummed. "I'm not very familiar with any of it. Are you sure you're here to talk with me about a...business venture?"

"Tell me, have you ever heard of Bitcoin?"

"...No."

"Ah, shame, shame- but the coin of the future is Schlattcoin! Some might call it a scam, but I call it an investment! You see, every coin that gets mined has a stamp of authentication and-"

"Tell me why you're really here."

The room fell silent.

Techno leaned forwards, locked eyes with Schlatt, and picked up his glass to down the rest of its liquid in one smooth moment. "I don't take kindly to others wastin' my time," he said, and tilted his head just right so that his tusks gleamed in the wash of light. "And I'm sure you don't want to waste your time, either."

They stared at each other.

Techno kept himself still. He was a bastion. He was a castle. He was impenetrable and he held himself with the calmness of a man that knew he'd get what he wanted with enough time. It was Schlatt who was showing the pressure, although he held out admirably long with one arm braced on a lifted up knee, drink hanging from his grasp, sprawled out with no mind to how viable the pose was in a faceoff.

He could wait forever.

And Schlatt, as was obvious, could not.

"Okay, damn- I'm really doing Schlattcoin but that's not what you're into, huh? Don't want to throw your favor behind an up and coming man that's going to rise and become a trillionaire right alongside the rest? Cold, you are. Fuckin' cold."

He watched. He waited.

"You're an asshole, you know that? Huh?"

Techno resisted the urge to yawn. He succeeded.

"Help me," Schlatt said slowly, "and I'll give you some Schlattcoin for the low, low price of free before it all blows up. Or maybe a few credits, whatever makes you feel better, huh? You'll be sittin' on a pretty stack of credits before all's said and done."

Techno breathed in. Out. "What's in it for me," he said, a murmur, a wondering call to action. He kept that unnatural stillness to him. "Or, rather. What's in it for you. What do you need help with, Schlatt."

He bared his teeth at Techno. Techno stayed a statue. A prison of himself, intentional. He was the key and the keeper.

"A favor or two," Schlatt said, downing half of his drink before shifting his posture into something more serious, more...solid. Seemed that the guy had more of a backbone than he thought. "Nothin' much. You can set some boundaries, eh? Money for you and a favor from good ol' Hypixel's Blade for when I need it. Maybe a bit of an endorsement, nothing formal. Maybe something that requires your...expertise."

"Expertise in..."

"Do you need me to fuckin' spell it out for ya, huh? Killing. Maiming, whatever the fuck. Your skills," Schlatt said, and Techno thought of the many ways in which he could send the ram hybrid out to flee for his life. He seriously considered it, for a second or two.

Nah. That was too much work for him.

"Say I agree," Techno said, and tilted his head a fraction of an inch. Schlatt's eyes followed him. "How much would it be? And what projected price would it climb to?"

"Wouldn't you like to know?"

"I think we're done here."

"Hey- hey- stop! Geez! It was just a joke, what the fuck, man, hey-"

"I'm not going to tolerate jokes right now," he said flatly. "Tell me what I ask or leave." He stayed standing, watching a bead of sweat on Schlatt, watching his ears flick wildly and the way that the outside light melted into him as if cotton candy belonged on a crisp suit. "Now."

"I just want protection," Schlatt hissed, "hybrid to hybrid, and I'm not fuckin' around, here. I'll make sure you have enough to be set for your whole life if you left your fancy shitty

company, okay? I'm not poor, gods. Even if I had to back it up with my own shit. Do whatever the fuck you want outside of it, I don't care, but I'd prefer to have someone of your...caliber on my side."

Set for your whole life if you left your fancy shitty company, Schlatt had said.

Hm.

"A favor," he said. "And I get to decide some of the specifics, within reason."

A slow grin from Schlatt.

He stared down at the man. Tilted his head up slightly, just to get that extra sliver of intimidation.

"Three favors," Schlatt said.

"Two. You're pushing it."

"Three."

One, if you're going to be like that.

They stared at each other again, a war of wills, but Schlatt wasn't backing down this time. He had caught onto something- had realized that he had caught onto something- and he was milking the experience for all that it was worth. "Four," Schlatt nearly purred, "with the fourth only optional, to be denied for any reason and retried again later."

"Two."

"Did I stutter?"

"No," he said dryly, "you didn't."

"Gets you out from under those corporate thumbs, huh? Out from whatever the hell they have you in? I've heard their practices, you know. Monopoly on talent, or whatever the fuck. They even have half of the music industry in the sphere, you know that? Train 'em all up, get manufactured chemistry that pleases the masses, tease them to hell and back while working the stars themselves into the ground."

Schlatt had the look of a madman. "You don't look any fuckin' different from when those idols are ready to break, honeybuns. Give em' a show, huh? Tell you what, I'll even throw in a favor of my own to figure out all the loopholes in the nice, shiny contract they made you sign. Bound to be plenty of 'em given how young you were when I heard you signed, huh? Huh, porkums?"

"Leave," Techno hissed, and he didn't hide the way that his sounds blurred against his tusks.
"Leave, Schlatt. No deal."

"Four favors, one with that ultimate clause," Schlatt breathed, looking more alive than ever as Techno loomed over him, "and you get set up for life. I break you out of all those words they put you under too, yeah? Those clauses. Those subclauses. Fuck 'em. I know my stuff and I know it fuckin' good, and nobody says no to money once you're out of contracts like that. Schlattcoin's gonna boom, baby. Nowhere to go but up."

"Get out of my apartment before I make you."

"Offer's always open, smoochums. You have my information. Think on it, eh? Remember, little Hypixel idols. Singers and their chains. You're a whole different breed of singer, that's all."

Techno watched as Schlatt rose, as he twirled to the waypoint at the front of his apartment, sat the glass down in the entryway table and winked at him.

"See you soon," Schlatt crooned-

And he was gone.

Techno stood in the empty space for a long time after his breathing had calmed, after the urge to break something had faded, and let air whistle through him. Let his body move with his lungs, with the control that he had nearly completely lost, the thread running through his body strung tighter than ever before.

A ping sounded at the back of his mind.

[NAME]: Blitz tournament opening showcase, tomorrow, 8pm. You're booked as the headliner. Don't forget your interview and meetings before then. Be here by nine at the latest. You know the deal.

Hah. Hah.

Techno blinked at a prickling in one hand before looking down to see shards of glass, some ice on the floor, bits of the shattered glass embedded in his hand. He took a moment, took one more deep in and out breath, and migrated carefully to the bathroom to pick it all out.

Offer's always open.

He was careful with each and every one. He'd need to treat it with a potion immediately after cleaning it so that nobody knew anything was off. He needed to grip weapons without trouble. A regeneration potion would do it. At least Quartz would provide any potions he needed for his own image and let his stock stay full, no matter that cost. Even if they took it out of some of the earnings he got.

Pick out the shards, piece by piece. Collect the essence of who he was.

Breathe in- and out. In- and out.

See you soon.

He thought not.

...He hoped not.

Techno licked his lips after finishing off his drink, breathing in the lavender tea mixed with honey. He poured himself another mug and swirled in some more, hunched over the kitchen counter as he was.

So his brothers still wanted him to join in on that revolution. While he was still remembering things. While his brain constantly drifted back towards Dream and Schlatt, while he constantly thought of the two and let his hands clench and breathed in and out to try and not only have memories trickle in that pertained to them.

Hah. What a fool he was, he supposed. Trying not to think of it only made him think of it all the more.

He rubbed at the bridge of his nose and sighed. The house was quiet. Even in the early afternoon. Nobody was asleep- but Phil was out on the docks, oblivious to anything that had happened the previous night, and Wilbur and Tommy were nowhere to be seen.

He thought, almost, that the two were plotting his demise or something.

It sure sometimes felt like it, especially with the rotten looks the two had given him at breakfast when Phil wasn't looking.

He didn't mention them to his brother. Hadn't, he supposed the better word was. He wanted to stew on it a little and think about what he wanted his response to be.

But his mind kept drifting to related matters and not to his brothers at all. He kept thinking of two people that haunted him that were on that server, the one his brothers wanted to fight inside so badly- but what mattered at that very moment, he thought, was Schlatt and the way that his brothers were so firmly aligned against him.

And about the way that his memories were only starting to shift focus off of Dream and onto Schlatt, making him worry at his lip about what the relationship between him and the other hybrid actually was, beyond talks over whiskey.

Was it- comradery? Friendship? Business?

Was it a trading of favors, of all things?

How many favors, if so, were left?

Nobody was there to cut through him slowly exploring his own thoughts. Nobody was there to watch as he opened the cabinets up one by one, searching for something and not finding it until he reached just high enough to access something in the corner.

Whiskey.

Good, if his nose was to be believed, but it was an aquired taste. He still hadn't quite gotten used to it, but it was a good thinking drink. Ice, drink, the proper glasses made all the difference. There was a difference between drinking to forget and drinking to think, and Techno thought that he at least knew the boundaries of the precipice that he now stood on.

The vertigo, metaphorical as it was, was astounding. It was Techno feeling his chest tighten, his lungs seize for a split second as he realized how easily he could fall too deep in thinking and turn out forgetting. Realized how easy it would be to become properly drunk and have everyone in a...commotion.

Techno rubbed at his eyes with the back of one hand and pulled his cloak from where it sat on the dining room table, slinging it over himself as he collected everything. The glass. The ice cubes, none of the small kind, but the type that was larger, the type that was carefully formed in ice trays at the forgotten back of the freezer space.

This felt, almost, like a ritual.

He paused.

Perhaps this was something he had done before. Perhaps. It could have been shaped by Schlatt, given how much his mind tried to associate the man with whiskey. Perhaps it was a habit formed all on his own but with wine instead, which he didn't doubt was some skewed version of what had actually happened. Or was happening.

He shook his head and continued on, lingering on every step, committing it to memory. He took a sniff of the whiskey, hummed, and migrated with the glass, its ice in it, and the whiskey bottle itself to his room.

Techno wasn't fond of the idea of anyone finding him like this, stewing in what-ifs and possibilities.

Schlatt and Dream were very much not two sides of the same coin. He had never associated them with each other. They both knew him. He knew the two of them. What role would it play in the off chance he ever saw either of them again? They both had messages that lurked in the back of his mind, Dream sending notes more often but Schlatt never having truly... stopped, even if his communications were more sparse in the first place.

He delved into his communicator's systems in the back of his head, parsing the data and flipping through functions like it was a sixth sense of his. He pondered it all and he tasted the whiskey, swirled it around quietly, and hummed.

[j.schlatt]: Another favor for you, honeybunches of oats. You know you love 'em.

[j.schlatt]: Mind joining me in a private server and kicking some ass like you always do, eh? Stamp out a few ants. Purge a few that aren't loyal to the funny ass setup I got going on. You'll love it.

[j.schlatt]: Not now, I fuckin' guess, because half the ants I want crushed aren't even here. Some emergency, I was told, but I can find out a traitor that way, eh? More time.

[j.schlatt]: Come on, Blade. You're smarter than this. Or are you really gone? You really gonna dip before I've even got those first three favors cashed in, huh? Really?

All of the messages, when he picked apart the fabric of its code to try and figure out the timestamps, had been spaced apart. They were all...set while he had been at Hypixel. Sometime after he had gone through his messages the first time.

Techno took a long, long sip of the whiskey. Relished the burn, the way that it brought him back to the matter at hand. As an afterthought, he switched over to check Teach- check Dream's most recent messages, the latest one...two days ago.

[dream]: I've been writing a lot, lately

[dream]: Lot of new theories about potential rune chains, although it'd be impossible for them to be sold because of what they do

[dream]: What do you think about sleep deprivation rune chains?

What. The. Fuck.

What had brought this on? What was he thinking? Techno was almost ready to tear his hair out- but he took a deep breath, settled his posture, and settled for refilling his glass just the tiniest bit. He didn't want to drink too much, but he thought that deserved at least a few solid sips.

Or ten. Or twenty. Whatever.

His brothers were out, probably talking about Dream's world. Schlatt had messaged him a few weeks ago about that very same thing. Dream was...he didn't know if it was connected to that, but he wasn't entirely sure that it wasn't connected to the world and the people in it.

He was tempted to at least reply to Teach. Dream. Techno was tempted to rebuke him and say that he should never work on something like that, whether it was to put on himself to stay awake longer or to, in effect, torture others- who did that? What kind of a hell may he want to inflict upon someone?

He had to decipher exactly what Schlatt wanted. Especially as he wasn't...going to go back on his word, even if he might twist it, even if he didn't know exactly how much was left. Techno was going to tie up all the favors that he had to do and he was going to wrap up the loose ends and then do whatever the hell he wanted with his life.

What did Techno do? What should he do?

One sip. Two. Calm yourself down. Think through it. There's malleability and there's space to move and you're not always chained to one course of action.

Techno felt that, at this point, it was obvious that he'd have to go to that world in some fashion. He didn't want to go. Didn't want to get tangled in all of the mess and then have to find his way back out again, wrapped in the lives of others when he had wanted so very much to be left out of it.

He wanted to figure out who he was, but he didn't want a target painted on his back in the process.

There could be a loophole he could jump through for Schlatt. He just had to see if his communicator had the original terms, if logs could go back for so long, if he could go through that one hoop by smarts and not by asking him for some kind of a copy.

But...but Dream.

Teach.

Techno sat back and hummed. He scratched at an arm and swirled his glass lightly. There was a weight on his shoulders. There was something watching over his shoulder, or something weighing on it- same thing- but there was a clarity to the situation as he sat in his room of fabric and weapons and memories and thought.

Secrets would come out eventually. Conflicting narratives would light it all up and if he didn't manage part of it beforehand, it would become a bloodbath. Of sorts.

He wouldn't get himself trapped in thoughts of favors or contracts- ah, how constricting that word felt- after he freed himself from Schlatt's hold. He'd try not to the the monster cloaked in red and painted in it, too, if he could try so. He didn't want to become a person that was coming closer and closer to merging with him.

If he took the traits of the past- which ehw was already doing- he wanted it to be the kinder ones.

(But he hadn't truly had any of the rage and bloodthirstiness that he had thought his past had had, right? It had all been a front, right? It had all been a front.

Techno still wasn't sure of that assumed fact.)

This was an enigma, just like he was, but...he had to move forwards. He had to straighten his back and he had to roll his shoulders and breathe through it, weather the storm. His brothers would understand, given time. Those he had known in the past would as well, given patience, given a common ground.

Take the piglin out of the Nether. Can't take the Nether out of the hybrid.

It was just common sense. He'd have to be swift about it on the end of his family. There'd be reprecussions. There'd be backlash.

But he had made his choice, had charted his path, and damn him, Techno was going to stick to it. He'd forge his life and he'd hammer what he wanted into it and if the metal wanted to play rough with him he'd let it slice him up all in the name of creating something he wanted to use.

A world he wanted to live in.

...But perhaps it could start with someone, ah, kinder to the cause. Someone who was more impartial. Who would understand.

Maybe he could start with Phil.

Plans never survive first contact with the enemy.

Techno knew that, in the back of his head. Not at the part where his communicator was, but at the part where an encyclopedia of only occasionally useful notes and knowledge laid. He knew that just like he knew a whole slew of comments about strategy and war, something he felt he could attribute to the slightly scuffed paperback book titled ‘the Art of War’ that had pride of place on a bookshelf that he hadn’t touched since coming back here the first time.

He knew facts. He knew bits and bobs about the ancient worlds when world creation and administration were first being explored, knew its relics and facts half-gleaned from what he thought may have been academic papers and half from cheesy media.

He knew things about animals. He knew that a cheetah was much, much faster than land, even if it couldn’t match the rare phantom in the middle of a dive.

He knew that a skeleton’s core would spill on the ground and char it if the skeleton had been particularly powerful, if it had killed a number of its own before meeting an end at his axe. Even if it was anecdotal evidence. He still knew.

His plan to tell Phil was neatly and immediately derailed by a fish.

Or, rather, the fish that Phil caught.

They sat out on, well- not the docks, for once, which was something that bemused him. They were up the river, further in the forest since Tommy and Phil had gone to clear out the deeper area the night prior. Techno sat cross-legged at the riverbank, Phil next to him on a foldable stool that he had brought along just for the occasion.

He had opened his mouth after a few minutes, half-firm words bubbling to his lips-

And then Phil’s line had pulled. And Phil had yelled, because it was the first one of the day and it was strong, pulling on the line with all of its might and the current didn’t help and Techno’s heart beat doubletime in his chest for a moment as he tried to breathe, breathe, breathe-

And then the moment was over. And they were both back to being perfectly still statues, the caught fish flopping helplessly in Phil’s closed box for them.

“The ones up here are a bit tougher,” his brother said to his stone-still form, to the way that his eyes stared directly at the water and didn’t move an inch. His mouth was zipped shut. He hated his damned jumpiness. His- his- fuck.

Couldn’t he tell his brother one thing on his own without something interrupting and sending his heartrate sky high?

"It'll be better food, though," Phil mused. "They'll last a little, enough for fish to accompany the next few days...maybe not as good for sushi as those from down by the docks are, but they'll be alright. I'd rather fry them anyways, or fillet them, or..."

Techno let his eyes close. Let the wind breathe through him, gentle through the storm that was his anticipation of whatever Phil would say.

Phil didn't entirely get it. He wouldn't, at least, assuming that the conversation that had ensued the other day had held in facts. Phil didn't see their whole...escapade in the same way. But he had to know something about the nature of servers, right? About how death could traumatize someone, and how he was conflicted about this Dream that they knew, so similar, confirmed to be the same- and about how he had known Dream before?

...Was he sure, in all reality, that he wanted to actually talk about that?

It had seemed so clear. It had seemed so clear.

But he just didn't know how to breach the topic with his sibling. With his older brother. With the way that he laughed at a dragonfly in the distance or started to fill the silence, not talking just to talk but talking as a comforting white noise in the background.

Phil knew that something was off, he thought. Maybe. Maybe he had just decided to go up the river when Techno had rolled out of bed early just to join him, snacks packed to spend the whole morning and part of the afternoon up there. Maybe he wanted to remind Techno that life was more than just the house, the garden, the fields, the dock, the water.

Maybe he wanted to tell Techno that everything was alright.

But instead he just started laughing about dragonflies and real flies and the way that they were both two birds of a feather, in some odd kind of a way. He went on tangents and he fell silent and started it up again a few minutes later and soon enough an hour had passed and another two fish had been caught.

He sat back and just...took a look at his brother, cast in the light as he was. Took a look at him and saw what he always saw: the man that had taught him and helped shoulder some of his burdens when he hadn't had to.

"Phil," he said simply, leaning back with both of his hands bracing him on the ground. Next to him, Phil just grunted. "Phil."

"Mmm?"

"I knew some of the people that Wilbur and Tommy are associating with, now," he murmured. "When I was...in Hypixel. Before. I knew two of them, at least."

Phil appeared to think about it for a second. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see him glance over at where Techno sat near him. "...Who? A friend of theirs?"

He considered what to tell him. Worried at his lip. Phil didn't know the specifics, but, but- he couldn't go without Phil knowing what Dream had done. The gravity of the situation as

Wilbur and Tommy had told it to him.

An eye for an eye, his mind murmured, thinking of Tommy dragging thread magic out into the open. Repay the favor.

“Someone who killed both of them,” Techno said, and looked up at the sky. Sighed. “Not in...a game kind of way. In the way that’s obviously made the two of them traumatized in some way.”

Silence.

After a beat or two, he tilted his head, turned it a fraction of an inch so he could see Phil’s face, shaded by his hat. It was a second before he saw the strange twist to his mouth, before he saw the way that Phil grew tense as he held the fishing rod.

“Traumatized,” Phil repeated.

“Traumatized and ready to call me in whenever they encountered something later on the road.” He paused. “Although that was a different person who...exiled them from land.”

“Wait- wait-“

“But it was Dream,” he carried on, “who invited them and then murdered them. And it’s not an infinitely respawning world, I don’t think.” Techno rolled his shoulders lightly.

“Something about a finite amount of lives, but not one, but, but...”

How did he say it? How could he accurately say what that conclusion was so Phil didn’t mistake it for something else, so he couldn’t call Techno a liar-

“So they could have died,” Phil murmured, “if the situation were different. And not like any of Hypixel’s situations.”

“Three lives, I thought I heard.” He let his mouth form an even tighter line. “And, apparently, Tommy’s also two down the...the drain.”

“And you said it was Dream who murdered them.”

“They said they were friends before, but...” He raised a hand to move it, to gesture in the air and sigh. “But they speak his name...angrily. And Schlatt’s, but...Schlatt just won some kind of an...election. And banished them.”

“You knew Dream?”

“...And Schlatt.”

“How?”

Now that was the million dollar question, huh?

Techno leaned forwards and crossed his arms as he leaned them on his legs. He stared at the river and refused to look at Phil. The scene had quieted. There was the bubbling of the river, the rippling as it went on its course. There was a breeze whistling through the trees.

There was no birdsong.

He considered that for a long moment. He listened and listened- but the birdsong didn't start back up. He couldn't hear anything else. There was no intruder, unless it was a very, very quiet predator. Mobs made noise. Many other animals made noise.

It was just them, at the riverbank.

"Dream was my teacher in thread magic," he said quietly into the near-silent air, head still as he looked to the water, to the flowing water that refused to change beyond what it was. "And he was- a friend. To who I was back then. But he hurt Tommy and he's still messaging me and I haven't messaged anyone since getting the communicator back and I don't know what to do."

Silence.

"Techno, I-"

"What the fuck did you just say?"

Oh.

That wasn't Phil's voice.

He turned his head beyond the water, beyond Phil, to stare back at the forest behind them.

Tommy and Wilbur stood there with clenched fists and eyes of fire. They stared and stared and stared and Techno thought oh, that's why the birds stopped chirping. My brothers were here and they weren't happy.

"Dream. That Dream. Smiley-mask. Annoying prick. Went to war with us just because we claimed a little section of land." Wilbur's voice was quiet. It was a cold, cold fury that burned there. "The one that got our friend to betray us so they could kill us all. The one that dueled Tommy and won."

Wilbur paused.

"That Dream," he repeated. "Was a friend and a teacher. To you in Hypixel."

He would bite the bullet. He straightened his shoulders and turned with the rest of his body, locking eyes as they stayed in a quiet standoff.

"Yes," he said to Wilbur's face. Saying nothing would just be a lie. Even if his heart was trying to pound in his chest, even if the expressions on their faces hid no clues as to what they wanted from him- if they had already heard some of what he had said, there was no point in

not telling them. “Yes. He taught me much of the embroidery and runes I know. He was a... good friend to who I was back then.”

Techno hummed and thought for just a second, tongue running over those teeth of his that didn’t exit his mouth no matter what. “He was also a very good combatant,” he added, and Tommy just about combusted from where he stood next to Wilbur.

“So that’s why you don’t want to fuckin’ come, huh?” Tommy’s words were acerbic, laced with poison and hurt that seemed- disproportionate. But perhaps it was because he had been the one hurt most by Dream, even if he seemed more angry about the whole situation than fully, deeply traumatized.

Techno averted his eyes.

“Not gonna say anything, bitch? Dream was your best buddy and we’re not even fighting him right now but you don’t want to maybe face him in the future, huh? And what was that about knowing Schlatt? Huh? Huh?”

“It’s nothing.”

“Oh, Techno,” Wilbur said lightly, the tone underpinned by steel, “I- we- sure think it’s something. You friends with him, too? The guy that took my country and kicked us out on the curb and said that we were never welcome back, the guy that-“

“I thought you were having fun, Wilbur. Tommy.”

Techno didn’t look back at Phil. His brother’s tone was...a mixture of many things. Hurt. Tired. There was a disbelief to everything that Techno felt in some measure, too. But... Techno didn’t do anything about it. He clasped his hands and he stayed quiet and he let the focus of his brothers fall on Phil instead of him.

“It was fun,” Wilbur said, taking the initiative before wincing. Obviously, he knew what he had said wrong. “Is fun,” he amended, but the damage was already done. “Really, it’s a misunderstanding, I-“

“No, I don’t think it’s a misunderstanding at all,” Phil said. Techno flicked his ear as he heard the fishing line, empty of any bite, being reeled back and the rod put to the side. He resisted the urge to bite at the inside of his mouth to ground himself. “This is a clusterfuck, huh, isn’t it?”

None of them seemed willing to say anything at all. Phil just sighed. Techno embarked on a watchful study of the grass in front of him, not glancing to the side, not looking up at anything. A few blades of grass seemed almost crumpled. Others seemed flattened, probably because of his hands. Some, he had pulled from the ground idly during the time he and Phil had spent there-

“Techno.”

He snapped his head up to see his brothers looking at him. When he finally looked towards the voice, he saw Phil's eyes, hard as rock- he saw them soften. He saw Phil look at them all and close his eyes as if praying.

"Is it too hard," Phil said, "to go a few days without arguing enough to make everyone like... like this? Is it too hard? Is it me?"

Guilt. Shame.

Techno breathed in and out. In- a beat, two, three- and out.

"Not like we woulda argued if Techno had told us before," Tommy muttered, and they all stewed in the fact that what Tommy had said was very much not true. All of them seemed to express that belief at the same time- Wilbur's half-snort, Tommy's look away from them all, Phil's sigh.

Techno wanted to disappear.

"We're going to go home," Phil said firmly, "and we are going to all talk about this together. As brothers. As family. And I need a fuckin' drink."

Wilbur's laugh was hollow. "Don't we all," he muttered.

At least Techno had a bottle of whiskey still in his room all ready to go.

The thought of it made the awkward trudge back home all the more worth it.

Phil found Techno in his room, staring holes into the bottle of whiskey that laid on his desk's surface. Techno steadied himself and breathed slowly, not shaking the atmosphere in the room any more than he had to. Phil's presence was gentle by the doorframe, not intruding overmuch.

"They're waiting in the dining room," Phil said, a quiet statement of fact rather than judging him for not facing them quickly enough for someone's tastes. "Do you need a moment?"

Techno wrung his hands out and let his posture loosen just a smidge. He stared down at the bottle and picked it up, considered the label, watched the liquid slosh around.

"This is why I only wanted to tell you," he said.

"...This would have happened sooner or later, even if they hadn't been there. Even if I had never told them about it."

"No," Techno sighed, "It wouldn't have."

They both observed the way that the bottle caught the light. Techno's sigh was strong, exhausted, unsteady even despite his best efforts.

Again, Phil asked: "Do you need a moment?"

“...Yes.” He paused. “No,” Techno said when Phil moved to leave. “No,” he repeated. “I’m fine, I just...I just...” He growled and shook his head and paced further towards the back of the room, eyes looking out the window at the midday atmosphere. “I wish I didn’t have to...to deal with this. I don’t care about Dream.”

Silence. They both knew a lie when they saw it- or, rather, heard it, but the way Techno’s shoulders hunched in on him was also probably a tell.

“I don’t want to care about Dream,” he corrected. He rubbed at an eye with his free hand. “I don’t want to help them out and then be caught in it all, again,” he mumbled. “But I owe...I owe Schlatt a favor or two. And I’m not going to...to tell them that. But I owe him a favor, and that complicates it even more on top of Dream, and- I don’t want to think about it. I don’t.”

He paced like a caged animal, like an almost-cornered animal in the middle of his room. Phil stayed a steady presence, a lighthouse at the edge of the sea, standing at the entrance to the bedroom.

Why did things have to be so complicated? Why did Techno have to do the song and dance of unwanted discoveries every time he decided to give away one little hint of something? Why, when he gave an unknowing inch, did they always decide to take a mile.

Breathe, he reminded himself. Slowly. In and out. In a few beats. Out some more. In- one-two-

“I’ll give you a few minutes,” Phil said, and turned to leave. Techno caught his eye just before he continued further. “...They want some answers, at least.”

...Yeah. Yeah. Everyone and their mother wanted answers.

And he barely even knew how to give any to them.

What a mess they all were, indeed.

What a mess they all were.

A few days ago- no.

A few weeks ago- no, no, no, that wasn’t where he was going.

A few years ago? A few years ago.

“A few years ago,” he mumbled to a captive audience, the atmosphere quiet and heavy, “I met...someone who said they could help me. They didn’t offer a name. They didn’t offer any identifying information. They had a mask, they had gloves, and they had...a promise.” Techno paused. “An offer,” he corrected. “They had an offer.”

He glanced up. Tommy was looking at the grains of wood in the table. Wilbur had his eyes on Techno’s. He averted his gaze to see Phil staring at Tommy, a sharp twist to his mouth.

"And they let me apprentice under them for embroidery magics," he said. "And...and they turned out to be Dream. The person I knew only as Teach was revealed as Dream when I...fought them in a televised challenge, once upon a time." A sigh. "I don't want to say much more than that."

"So you're saying," Wilbur hummed, cutting through the thick of it as if through butter, "that Dream was your teacher. And a friend. And you found this out...when, exactly?"

"...When I was at Hypixel. When we were at Hypixel."

"When, Techno. That's- that barely narrows it down."

"I don't know when," he mumbled. "I don't- half of it's a- a haze- Wilbur-"

"Moving on," Phil said sharply, and the rest of them paused. Tommy huffed. "Don't push it, Wil."

"But he- I-" Wilbur paused. He paused and he took a deep breath and Techno watched as he placed his ever-so-slightly shaking hands back on the table. "I won't," he said, even if it sounded like his teeth were gritted. "Privacy. Sure."

"Why," Tommy said out of the blue, "did we not- why did we barely know fuckin' anything about what you did there? The, uh, embroidery 'n shit. Exactly how popular you were. You bein' all weird about violence. And now...now Dream."

And the contracts, Techno tacked on silently in his mind. And the hand-washing, and Quartz all on its own, and agents and meetings and photoshoots and carefully curated pieces of my life and-

He needed to breathe, too. He took a moment.

"Maybe I didn't want to talk about it with any of you," he said, feeling distinctly like he wasn't all there anymore, and let air whistle through his lungs. Techno ignored the way that Tommy slammed the table, the way that Phil spun to reprimand him, the way that Wilbur's hands clenched into fists.

"We're your brothers," Tommy hissed. "All we knew was that you were fighting there! And that you were one of the best, and that you liked a few places and took us to them and you never let anyone beat you and-"

His younger brother seemed to crack. He shook as if in a storm for a second, facial expression twisting until he was grimacing. He looked away from them all and clenched his hands and looked...small. So small compared to the personality he gave off.

"It's like we never knew you," he muttered. "You barely came home. And now we found out you were off with Dream, and other people, and Schlatt, apparently, I-" Tommy put his face in his hands and nearly growled. "I..."

"...I didn't have much of a chance to come home," he offered tentatively. "I...my schedule was. Packed. I think. And I had to move things around to come home, and I was just...busy,

and-“

“Busy learning something like thread bullshit with Dream? Busy doing fancy fuckin’ twirls and beating it into everyone’s heads that you’re better than them? Too busy for us?” Tommy’s voice cracked again, a heartwrenching slip, an almost-keening noise that pierced. “Too busy for me? Did- did-“

Techno closed his eyes and mourned, mourned, mourned.

“Did we even really know you, Techno?”

Oh.

Oh, that was a line that Tommy had just crossed, and it made him so angry, it made him fucking fume, it made his shoulders square and his tusks gleam and he shook with the anger of it all. Techno breathed in- out- in-

“Are you really even the brother that I fucking knew-“

“I don’t even know myself, Tommy!”

The room spun to a still.

He blinked, and he was looming over the table, not as tall as some of them but bringing a monstrous presence all the same. It made his lip curl- a hybrid, a monster, same thing, always other and intimidating and unable to be unnoticed, especially him, fuck- but he utilized it all the same, leaning over and looking Tommy in the eye.

Techno tilted his head just so that the light would glint off of it better.

I can kill you with these, he thought, strung out and tired and so fucking angry. I can gore you just as I’ve done with so many of those people I fought in a world I don’t remember very well. He leaned forward more, more, a rumble in his chest growing with every second. I can kill you and you’d say dead, you- I’d never do it, but I could, I could-

“I don’t know myself,” he managed to get out, a tongue of steel and poison with enough lethality to kill for good. “I’ve been trying to figure out who I am ever since I saw Phil in that stupid subworld, potatoes and trees and crows and you’re the ones who tried to force me to remember,” he said.

Oh, he was on a roll. Tommy looked- scared. That was good. (Was it?) He was paying attention to him.

He ignored how Phil was halfway out of his seat. Ignored how Wilbur was plastered to the back of his chair.

“You’re the ones that wanted this,” he said, voice a winter wind. Unstoppable. Unseeing. “You’re the ones that wanted me to be just how you remember. This is what you remember, right? A Techno that never told you that. Who didn’t want to tell you that, except you messed it up. You- you-“ He leaned forward one more inch. Tommy shrunk down further.

"I'm not who you want me to be," Techno growled, hands splayed on the table to keep him up. "I'll never be the perfect one, I'll never be the untouchable one, or the Techno that always stayed away and made everyone happy by not intruding, I'm not the Techno that keeps the inside jokes and remembers them and teaches you how to fight." In the absence of room to lean further forwards, he squared up and made his presence loom for him.

"Don't ask for just the Techno you remember and expect me to just be a carbon copy," he said. His voice was quiet. It was deadly. He tried to not break the table and succeeded from slamming a hand down on it. Instead, he kept it still. Still, still, still. He was a glacier. He was a solid plane of ice. He was untouchable. "I just wanted to farm. But now you have- this."

His throat was getting hoarse. He kept going. Kept pushing. There were tears in Tommy's eyes, if he saw correctly. Just a few. "I'll never be who you want me to be, and there's so much missing, and I- I-"

Techno's own tone shifted a little, a brittle piece of glass that cracked in just the wrong spot. He breathed in and out, trying to regain lost breath.

"Can't I just be who I want to be, Tommy? Wilbur? Phil? Can't I just be who I am? Why do the actions of someone I only- only half remember- even matter? Who cares about Dream?"

"Oh, Techno," Phil whispered. Techno closed his eyes and tried not to fall into the abyss.

Or, rather, he tried. And failed. There was no submerging himself and exiting that way here.

Now, he just- he stepped back. He stood up straight and he looked anywhere but at Tommy and ignored the hurt, bitter slant to his heart. To his mouth. He tried to steady his breathing and only found himself quietly shifting to the state of unbecoming.

"I'm your brother, Tommy," he said, as if to finish off a loud rant with quieter words to soften the blow. "I...I just can't be the perfect one you thought I was. Not...not any more."

Silence.

There was no salvaging the outburst. There was no correcting a ship that was hellbent on crashing itself into the rocks, a course set when he had re-met Phil for the first time, had punched him in the face, had fished for nothing in a world void of anything but him and his thoughts and animals of the land and sky.

There was no saving a shipwreck. There was no correction of the situation.

There was only dealing with it.

And none of them were doing very well.

He took a step back. And another. And another.

"I'll just- I- I can go. I can go."

"Let's all sit down," Phil said, sounding very much like he had just been in the eye of a hurricane. Techno could sympathize with that, a little. His hands shook as Phil guided him back into his seat. "We have...a lot more to talk about than I thought."

Tommy looked up from rubbing at his eyes and stared directly at Techno. Alarmed, he didn't look away.

"You're not the brother I- we- knew." Tommy rubbed at his eyes once more and let out a hiss of a sigh. "You're not," he repeated, "and I- I thought I knew that. I thought I fuckin' knew that, but I just...I thought you'd remember, and everything would be good, and we could go to the server together."

What could Techno even say to that? What was there to say?

"This...what was going on at Hypixel," Wilbur interjected, looking confused when Techno looked at him, "that...made you change so much? Why was everything fine when you were there? Why was everything- not fine- when you remembered it?"

Techno wrung his hands out. He rubbed his thumbs in circles over the backs of his hands and thought of the blood that coated his mind in sleep. Monster. Thought of the red that he thought he saw on his hands occasionally, enough to rub them raw in the sink. The Blade. Thought of deals and agents and crowns. The Blade never dies.

"It- it helped you all," he said haltingly. "It...fighting...going to Hypixel...I helped. Music. Private server licenses. Making...enchanting clothing for you. I don't..." He hummed, wordless again, and tried to gesture it all out. None of them got the message he was trying to almost beam across, of struggle and exhaustion and doing things you didn't want to just for money and favor and privilege and- "It was for you," he finally finished. "Wil. Tommy. Phil. Wanted to help. Wanted to...to...do something."

They all fell silent for a moment. Techno bathed in shame and quiet despair and wondered if this was healing.

"I don't like fighting," he mumbled, almost too quiet to hear. "But I'm good at it. I was. I am. I am good at it."

"...Licenses," Phil echoed, and Techno didn't look at him. He wouldn't. He wouldn't. "Like...private server licenses. Like don't worry about it licenses. We...I...Techno..."

He put his head in his hands and tried to become something other than himself. He failed. (Of course. Of course. He already was something other than himself. He was other, he was unwanted and he wanted to flee because it was all out in the open and-) He breathed in and out and let his stupid, stupid embroidered cloak bathe him in its aura of protection.

"At least," he tried, "that's what I think I had wanted. I don't...I don't know anymore."

There was no confirming, one hundred percent, what that past him had thought. "I don't know if I'll ever even get most of my memories back," he said, and watched through his fingers as all of his brothers wilted. "It...I know parts. Important parts. But not all of them,

and not the spaces between, even if I know some of the context, I- I'll never be what you want, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, Phil, Wil, Tommy, I'm sorry, I-“

“I think it says a lot,” Wilbur said quietly, not looking directly at him but at the air directly next to him, “that you did something like that. And...and...” He sighed. “But you knew some of the people we hate,” he said, “before we even...knew them. Or maybe at the same time I...I don’t know. But...gods, Techno.” Soon enough, Wilbur had his head cradled in his hands too. “Why,” he mumbled, muffled, “does everything about this have to be so fucking complicated?”

At least Phil knew parts of this. At least part of Phil’s expression was one of muddled understanding, the talk that they had had in the middle of the night while Techno was at Hypixel, of contracts and fighting and I did it all for you. I became a monster for you.

Their language was emphasized in the spaces between. There was Techno’s aching for the ability to define himself on his own terms with no knowledge of what the terms could even be. There was Phil’s yearning from afar, unable to help them while they were at Hypixel. There was Wilbur’s requests and demands, there was Tommy’s yelling, there...there was...

“I don’t want to talk about it,” Techno said. His body was still, still, still. He breathed in. Breathed out. Let himself steady yet again. “About- Dream. Schlatt. Any of that. Just let me- I-“

They all waited for him to smooth out his breathing and compose himself. He looked back at all of them, at all of the ways they didn’t quite meet his eyes, and tried to reconcile all of their expressions with the fact that they were truly a family.

“Just let me talk about it on my own,” he whispered. “I...let me talk. Give me. Time. Don’t fucking push me and say you don’t know me, because you don’t and I don’t either and-“

Deep breaths. Deep breaths. Gods.

“And I’ll tell you what I want,” Techno said, fists clenched, “and not tell you what I. Don’t want to tell. I knew Dream and I knew other people and you just have to- to- live with it.”

He stood up abruptly from his chair and relished in the fact that they all finally, finally looked at him.

Techno was so, so tired, and words fell from his lips like rain. “If you push me like that...if you do that again,” he said, “I’ll leave.”

A pause.

“And I...I won’t come back.”

He turned and strode out of the room, out of the foyer, only stopping at his room to grab a stress-polished sword before exiting right out the door.

After all, he didn’t plan on coming back in until late in the night, and he had to at least have something to defend himself with.

Nobody stopped him from leaving.

He wished that was actually surprising.

"I'm not saying I like him," he said out of the blue two days later to Wilbur, after almost forty-eight hours of horrible, awkward stilted conversation between anyone in the house. He butchered one of the fish Phil had caught earlier in the day with a brutal efficiency, hands on autopilot while Wilbur washed his hands in the nearby sink.

His brother froze. He refused to do the same.

"Techno—"

"I'm not saying I like him," Techno repeated, voice saturated with frustration in an attempt to make him shut up and understand. "But the person I was back then liked him. He helped me. I talked to him more than I did you or Tommy or Phil."

He let the silence rest there as he carefully took out the spine, as he set aside part of what he got for stock-making later. It wasn't a big fish, but it was delicate enough to need careful handling, especially with his somewhat larger, clumsier hands. He did well enough, he supposed.

The faucet turned off, and the water that flowed out drained fully into the bottom of the sink and out of it. Techno considered portioning the fish further- four parts, maybe, on the larger bits- but huffed and shook his head.

If Phil wanted smaller pieces, he could separate it himself. He was just doing the general work.

"You knew him before he made his server," Wilbur said, and that sentence in itself made Techno...still.

"Made his server," he echoed. "He's the admin." That's what he had thought before, and he had said it out loud, if he recalled correctly, but...there was something different in hearing that spoken out loud.

"...Yeah?" Wilbur, when he glanced over, appeared to be considering the fact. "Another guy, Callahan, does a lot of the maintenance, but...I think he's the. Main admin of the server. Which. Sucks."

Considering Wilbur's recent history with the man- and Tommy's- Techno wasn't exactly...surprised.

Techno...wondered.

Wondered about Dream's outbursts. Teach's outbursts. Same thing. About the responsibility, and the weight that seemed to cloak on his shoulders beyond just being a thread enchanter, about echoing notes that Techno had felt about his contract work and being under Quartz's thumb but not sharing that aspect of it, the entertainment bent-

He wondered, in a quiet kind of way, if Dream was an admin that Hypixel had poached from a smaller server when his abilities had been discovered.

It wasn't a rare phenomenon. Admins that...could work with the fabric of a world enough to maintain respawning capabilities were poached as soon as it was discovered. Secreted away in hub worlds often used for schooling and entertainment and big business.

Which made it all the more odd if he was just using those talents on a small server, not being able to fully exert respawning capabilities and instead shifting it to some kind of a hybrid lives-type thing, but, but-

“Techno?”

Simon hadn't told him much about those admins, about exactly what they were capable of. Techno understood- the Techno of before understood- how non-disclosure agreements worked. But he knew some of the basics. And therefore Techno knew some of the basics, and-

Hm.

He didn't know what to make of it.

He didn't know what to make of it, and it was driving him mad. Was he escaping Hypixel and hiding something away with those he said were friends? Why would he enforce a lives system instead of laying low? Was it really Dream who maintained it and not Callahan, who he knew nothing of? Was Teach- Dream- just playing god and controlling a world with a heavy hand that nobody else would approve of and opening up a server without a license because he knew how, and-

“...You're sure thinkin' hard there, Techno.”

His mind ground to a halt.

“...What's going on? Why'd you say that? Or...or zone out like that?”

“...No reason,” he eventually said, trying to ignore how something in him was slowly curdling. Mysteries on mysteries on mysteries, he thought dryly, and didn't let his hands shake as they finished up preparation of the fish, starting to clear stuff out and package edible parts up. “...Just...thinking.”

“Yeah.” A beat. “I can see.”

“It doesn't matter,” he muttered. He shrugged it off and shook his head and let himself give a long, slow sigh. “It doesn't matter.”

“...If you say so, Techno.”

He watched Wilbur leave with a slow step, a thoughtful tilt to his head as he went outside to go bother Tommy and Phil out on the docks. He watched and watched and watched and drank his fill.

Techno was rather sure that Wilbur would go back to walking on eggshells around him, but that had been nice.

Even if he was now thinking of Dream and his own scattered ideas about the varied responsibilities of adminship.

About the tangle of problems that, over and over again, Dream's whole server got more and more entangled in with every new piece of information Techno learned about it all.

Something was- perhaps not wrong there, but...misleading. False advertisement, he supposed.

A server for friends often meant exactly that. Not...whatever his brothers said they went through. Not whatever the situation with Dream being the admin was.

Not...everything he heard about it.

His own movements were slow as he turned the thoughts over in his head, ruminating on matters that undoubtedly had no easy answer.

...They'd figure it all out one day.

For now, he had stuff for fish stock to be put up, and the rest of it stored carefully in another section of the fridge to deal with.

Busywork was never over, not in his books.

The world was washed in color. It was deep blues on vibrant oranges on a thin line of green at the horizon, the sun dipping just enough to let the flash of unnatural color pass through for a few seconds.

He sat on a hill overlooking the house and garden, overlooking the dock and the water, and let his back rest against a tree. Techno held a sword loosely in his hand, the edge of night and day closer than ever, and breathed in the clear, crisp air.

It was easy to see a figure come out of the house and start walking towards him, even if it took a few seconds to figure out who they were.

...Tommy.

He supposed he wasn't surprised, after the talk with Wilbur earlier in the day. He had been cryptic enough that it was probably something he would talk with Tommy about.

Techno looked up at Tommy as he approached, as he stood in front of him and looked down upon his sitting position. For a moment, they just observed each other, Techno with dark, partially lidded eyes and Tommy with an inscrutable expression that he couldn't parse the meaning of.

Eventually, Tommy sat down right next to him.

The sun started dipping further below the horizon. The melting of blue and orange turned into a wash of deep violet and navy, both playing with the warm colors that struggled to stay alive at the bottom.

The moon was out.

The sky was cloudless. Stars winked into view.

“You’re an asshole, Techno, you know that?”

He listlessly turned his head to stare at Tommy, who was looking back out towards the horizon just like he had. His legs were pulled up to his chest, arms around them, and he looked for all the world just like a kid that had no anchor at all.

“Yeah, I’ve heard that before,” he said back, and watched with a half-dismissive eye as Tommy huffed and refused to look at him. The atmosphere was- well. Neither of them were exactly walking on eggshells, but there had been a line crossed days ago and they hadn’t yet brought up the elephant in the room. Or...the elephant on the hill, if Techno wanted to play some kind of smart.

Ten or fifteen minutes later- he didn’t care to measure it, but he watched the passage of the disappearing sun- Tommy shifted in his place and Techno glanced back at him, curious. Were there any miraculous insights this time? Did the sun shine? Was Techno a bit of an ass? Was there any fish in the ocean?

“I’m sorry,” Tommy said, and. Oh.

He hadn’t exactly expected an apology.

His bafflement must have been made clear in the way that he was utterly shocked silent, but Tommy appeared like he was rolling his eyes before turning to stare right at him.

“I’m sorry, okay?” He repeated it as if it were some kind of an anathema, the pinnacle of an older teen battling with something like shame and indignity and righteous anger. “I’m- I- I shouldn’t’ve fuckin’ called you, uh, whatever. Shouldn’t’ve said we didn’t know you, or anything. Stupid. Of me.”

“You’re not wrong,” he pointed out, and watched as Tommy’s expression soured even further.

What was he doing wrong? What kind of line was he crossing, what barrier was so horrible, what was it about him and fucking up every social cue he ever met, even if the other person there was someone who constantly barged past every single social norm available and started to shout at people? What about that statement made Tommy’s expression go so- angry?

“...Sorry,” Techno muttered, and looked back away from Tommy to observe the fact that the sun was a sliver from plunging the world into darkness. He kept a firmer hold on his sword after that notice. Tommy hadn’t exactly brought anything with him.

“The fuck’re you being sorry about?”

He blinked. When he glanced to the side, Tommy was staring at him with some kind of a mulish, pissed-off expression.

“...You didn’t like what I said.”

“Of course I- what’re you- I- fuck,” Tommy hissed, “why’s it so hard to have a goddamn heart-to-heart without Phil there to be all ‘Tommy, calm down, you don’t understand, how about you look at it from this angle you little shit’ or whatever? Nothing’s right and you don’t get it and it’s not all about that!”

Techno said nothing. He figured that Tommy at least had...something on his mind that he had to work through. Maybe giving his own spin hadn’t been- the best idea.

Night truly fell, and Techno took a deep breath in. Out. In.

“It was still shitty to say,” Tommy gritted out, and Techno considered the merits of trying to give his brother an awkward hug. He wasn’t sure how well it’d go. Chances were that he could spit and hiss and claw his way out of it, at this point.

That was fine. At least Techno had ears to lend him instead.

“I shouldn’t’ve, uh, said it, and I was just mad and I wanted to know whatever the hell the whole Dream thing was about and- and-“ His breath whistled through his teeth. “You’re still my fucking brother, okay? Even if you’re rude and an asshole and I want to punch you half the time. Doesn’t matter if you don’t remember half of it. You’re still- you. Or whatever. Even if you had all those. Secrets and shit.”

Secrets and shit.

He supposed that was an apt way to put ‘years of your life that you still refuse to divulge to your family because of deep-set anxiety and whatever kinds of hell the years actually held in them’.

“Wil talked with me about it,” Tommy continued, “after Phil talked with him about it.” For the life of him, Techno couldn’t help the way that his lips twitched at the statement. “It was dumb and I just- like. Fuck.”

But you were right, he hesitated to say, the right words for the situation a mess that he couldn’t completely figure out. You were right and I lashed out at you for that, and I hurt you when you were just stating the truth. You shouldn’t be apologizing-

Instead, he cleared his throat and glanced towards Tommy.

His brother was staring back at him, for once quiet and- waiting for a response.

“He was pretty stressed when he wasn’t at my apartment, I think,” he said, and neither of them needed clarification about who, exactly, he was talking about. Techno looked back down at his hands as his ears flicked, grass rustling nearby- but it was only the wind.

It was only the damned wind that was bothering them.

"I didn't know him that well, I think," he said, again clarifying- I think, I think, I think. I don't know. I can't know. Not all of it is there. Most of it might never be there. "Didn't know most of what he did outside of his visits. I knew some of the restaurants he liked, and some fighting moves, but...we mostly talked about embroidery and runes." The corners of his mouth turned down. "He's- good at them."

They sat in silence for a long moment, the crickets slowly coming out to play a quiet background tune from further away. Techno lifted his head so that it would thunk against the tree, so that he could look up to dark branches and darker leaves.

"He liked to talk about how busy he was," he said to the sky, to the boy right next to him. "He always felt stressed. From what I can remember.

A wordless question: Was he like this for you, too, when you had a closer relationship to him? What's the deal with him inviting you to the server in the first place?

It was a long time before Tommy responded- long enough for Techno to pick up the sound of a spider trying to creep up on them, standing to spin and pace into the forest to pick it and the one that had followed in its footsteps off.

When he came back, Tommy looked- deep in thought.

"He was an ass," Tommy eventually said, Techno standing next to him with a spider-covered sword and a straight posture. He looked down at his brother and wondered just how thoughtful he had really been.

He hummed wordlessly. Tommy huffed.

"Like- I-“ He groaned and tried to clarify. “The kind of ass that's, like, stressed all the time ‘n shit. He always had stuff to do, or whatever, when Wil and I met him. And then he got really fuckin' focused on defeating L'manburg, figures he'd focus on us, I just- like- like what the fuck, Techno? Stressed enough to do that shit?”

Stress that turned into something crueler. Something more obsessive.

Techno hummed again, but didn't say anything more.

The night rolled on, and Techno kept a quiet vigil until Tommy cursed under his breath and started on his way back towards the house. After a quick sweep of the immediate forest, Techno followed.

Navy bled into indigo that bled into memories across an open sky, pages that Techno might never be able to parse.

At least he knew what he did.

He slept well.

"Dream liked to make things for his friends," he said one day out of the blue to Phil and Wil, the three of them sitting out on the docks as the morning rolled into the afternoon. Phil and Techno had fishing rods out- and oh, how it still surprised him that things would actually bite the line- while Wilbur was working on...something.

A notebook, a few pens and pencils, scribbling away with a guitar in reach. He wasn't sure what, in all honesty, Wilbur was doing, but he supposed it was...good in some way. It didn't disturb what they were doing, at least.

Both Phil and Wilbur looked at him oddly, and Techno stared right back at them like a curious owl.

"...Embroider things for them," he mumbled, a bit self-conscious now, "like...I did for you. Clothes. I think he did a blanket, once. Things like that. He just...hid it better than I did."

He stared at his line studiously, hoping against all hope that now would be the time a fish would bite. And....now would be a time a fish would bite. And now-

"Dream made Tommy trade away a prized possession of his just so our nation could stay," Wilbur mused, and both he and Phil swiveled their heads on a dime just to give Wilbur a stare. Techno had known part of it, but seriously- "Hey! Hey, what're you looking at me like that for?"

"That's not an even trade," Techno said immediately.

Overlapping his words, Phil seemed even more incredulous. "That's a bit far to go on a server that's just for friends-"

"That ship seems to have sailed a long time ago," Techno murmured.

"Hey! I heard that!"

Food for thought. Thoughts for food.

He mused on it as they fished, as the conversation slowly shifted to other matters and Techno didn't feel like contributing much. As he held the rod, as he thought of matters best left unsaid and things that were too complicated to always properly describe...he thought, and he thought, and he thought.

It was unsatisfying to come to no answer, but, well. Of course he hadn't come up with an answer to what his mind was roaming quietly through.

I wonder, he thought, what Dream tells others about his server.

It was the last productive thought he had all day.

Techno considered the half-drunk bottle of whiskey in front of him as he heard the door to his room open. With a glass of ice, with an evening when he was a bit tired and ready to just have a glass and let his mind sharpen or wander as he liked.

“Hey, Techno- huh?”

He glanced back to see Tommy in the doorway, stood leaning on one side with an owlish expression on his face. He raised one eyebrow and picked the whiskey bottle up, sliding to his feet with a somewhat baleful stare.

He tilted his head. What is it, Tommy?

“What’re you- eugh, whiskey. Why’d you have that?”

“I wanted some,” he said dryly out loud, and watched Tommy flush a bit of red.

“That’s not what I- why do you want some, Techno? Huh?”

“Thinkin’,” he said, and that was that. He strode past Tommy, shouldering him just a little bit so he could get past, and migrated towards the kitchen so he could grab the right glass.

But, well. Tommy didn’t exactly get the memo.

“Thinking about what, bitch?”

“Language,” he said absentmindedly, and navigated towards where the glasses were, getting one just to throw some ice into it from the freezer. “Thinkin’ about things.”

“Like?”

“Like Dream and Schlatt and that stupid server you’re on,” he said flatly, and ignored the flash of hurt in Tommy’s eyes with a stoicness that he didn’t feel. “Whiskey’s good for that. Not like wine or beer or anythin’ else, but you’re too young to drink any of it.”

“I’m plenty old, especially if I have permission-“

“Parental permission,” he said, “and you have no parents here, kid.”

“Well, Phil’s as good as one-“

“Cousin, not a parent.”

“A guardian figure-“

“Your cousin,” Techno repeated. “Basically your brother. And I’m not letting you waste any of this. ‘S good whiskey.”

“Fuck you,” Tommy muttered, but sat down across from him on other sides of the dining table when he slid his way into one of the chairs.

He poured his whiskey. Stirred it for a few seconds. The burn down his throat was just as expected, but at least it brightened him up a little bit. Cleared his head.

“It’s late,” he said. Second time in a row that Tommy was up so late- no, he was just thinking of time wrong. He slept the night before. It had only been the night before that that he had

joined him outside as evening fell. "You should be sleeping. Phil's asleep."

"Wil's out checking the forest," Tommy said, and Techno rolled his eyes.

"Not th' same thing."

"Is too."

I'm not going to take you up on that challenge, Tommy, he thought, and snorted. You're too childish to let it go. "You still shouldn't be up at this time," he said instead.

"What're you thinkin' about Dream 'n all that other stuff for, then? And what's the deal with Schlatt?"

What's the deal with Schlatt, indeed.

Techno huffed. He glanced to the side a bit and let his lips twitch, although he wasn't sure in what direction. "Just someone in the industry, for a while," he said, keeping it...vague. Nothing about favors. Nothing about deals that had the two of them looking at each other in a different way afterwards, gaguing each other for any negative reactions.

He breathed in and out and tried to not let any of it get to him.

"An industry partner."

"Business," he said, confirming it with a dip of his head. "...Liked whiskey." He looked down at the bottle and hummed. Something was itching at the back of his mind, scratching at it like there was something important to the conversation at hand. A blink-

"He gave me this bottle, I think," he mused, and picked up his own glass of the stuff, swirling it in the overhead light of the room. "Expensive stuff."

"He's an asshole," Tommy muttered. "More than Dream."

"Yup," he said, and watched how taken aback Tommy was by the admission. "Tricked me with some things," he said, mind running over favors and mild but blatant manipulation, the way that his horns liked to take on the color of all the billboards shining light into his room. "Much ruder to other people, that kind of thing."

"When wasn't he an ass?"

"Never," Techno hummed, but smiled slightly when Tommy just...looked at him funny. "He was always a bit less of an ass to me, though." At the curious look, he pointed to his ears, to his tusks, to the shade his eyes were that could only be matched by others through contact lenses. "Hybrid," he said.

Tommy mouthed a quiet oh.

"I'm not quite sure what he was to me," Techno said, a quiet murmur, "but...not a friend. Not much more than that. But...something between a friend and a business partner. I think. If I

remember correctly." The slant to his mouth was bittersweet. "I probably don't, I guess."

"He kicked us out," Tommy said.

"I know."

"Oh."

He was slow to drain the rest of the whiskey in his glass. Their conversation slowly drifted to more and more beneign things, but he kept thinking about Schlatt, about favors unpaid, about his brothers and how they certainly still wanted him to come back with them. About information divulged about Dream over days spent quietly ruminating over the meltdown that was an outdoor trip turned indoor interrogation.

Techno's mind kept drifting to Phil, of all people. Phil who took the first steps to taking him out of an abyss that had only grown ever deeper in the unknown, stretched amount of time he had spent on a lonely island. Phil, who had sheltered him without telling his brothers for knowledge of what they'd probably want, about the loud chaos they'd bring in their wake.

Phil, who had hurt and helped him in equal measure, clumsy steps along a clumsy path to recovery all colored with an instance of being pushed into fighting beyond his strongest wishes.

He eyed Tommy, who was talking animatedly about someone named Jack just as much as he was talking about Tubbo and someone Wilbur had dubbed his very own 'child', and wondered what it was like to not have to fight on every front of healing.

Of remembering.

It was hard to pin it all down.

I think I still owe him a favor, he nearly said, but refused to interrupt the conversation. He just breathed in and out and tried to not get the reality of who he was swept up with the rest of what his life had become.

It was nice. To listen to Tommy.

Whiskey put on the table, he leaned in and listened closer. Hummed at all of the right parts. He tuned in and kept tuned in, for once, and relished every single moment he still got to spend cataloguing the way that Tommy smiled when he talked about stupid shit he and Tubbo had done together, tangents trailing off into this or that, about family and things he didn't remember but things Tommy was willing to explain all the same.

It felt like that chance would get torn away from him.

He tasted change in the way that the whiskey slid down his throat. He scented questions on the air, watched the way that Tommy's face changed with all the answers his brother knew he wasn't getting from Techno.

But he watched, and he listened, and he cherished the way that the conversation sat on him, making his posture heavy and sated, and Techno even offered a small but true smile at the end when his brother trailed off with nothing to say.

“I think I’d like to meet Tubbo one day,” he murmured, voice slurring from more than just his tusks, from a quiet and drawn out exhaustion paired with the excellent whiskey. “...That’d be nice.”

Tommy seemed to- glow, almost, in the gentle happiness that one got when something that they cared about was being accepted by another person.

I wonder how else I’ve failed them by not paying attention, he thought, and let his lips twitch even further upwards as a response, even as his mood...didn’t sour, but instead grew heavier on his shoulders.

I wonder what else they’d all smile about like this to me.

And wasn’t that a thought?

It was inevitable, but at least they were being up front about it. With Phil out to go fish up the river, Techno had woken late another day to two faces over him. After a lazy swing with his hand, well- they backed off and let him be, a promise of either tea or coffee when he came out of his room ringing on the air.

“Well,” he said out loud to himself as he got ready, mumbles covered in sleepy overtones, “guess it’s now or never for that conversation that never got finished.”

Of course it’d be them asking him to come back with him to Dream’s world yet again. Of course.

Somehow, he still felt surprised when those words fell again out of Wilbur’s mouth.

“Please,” Wilbur said, and Techno could watch as the storm rolled into the room, as his eyes grew almost desperate, as he leaned in and stared at Techno who could only stare blankly back. “We need you, okay? We can’t just do a two-man operation, especially with a third stuck in enemy territory.” He winced. “Not to mention our- absence.”

“Tubbo hasn’t been responding to me much lately,” Tommy muttered. “I think Schlatt has a hold on, on fuckin’ everything. Wonder if they know where our base is. If anyone still wants to fight back against him.”

Techno tried to figure out how it felt to be confident in rejecting others. He worried at his lip and stared at them as they started and stopped explanations on why he should go with them.

He just- he-

“I can’t leave Phil like that,” he said, breaking just a bit with every word he said. There was nothing he could do that didn’t leave everyone unhappy in some way. Phil wanted him to

stay, which he was perfectly fine with but something his other brothers wouldn't accept. No matter what, nobody would be happy with the outcome.

Perhaps that was the art of the compromise.

"I can't just do that the whole time," he stressed, and his mouth twisted with- not anger. Not regret. But...well. Something like stress. "I don't want to fight for you. I don't want to fight anyone anymore, okay? I've talked about it before. Please."

"Food, then," Wilbur said, harsh-toned but not in the way that spoke of anger. His harsh was all hard-eyed and steel-boned and unwilling to back down. "Intelligence, if you want to keep speaking with Dream and Schlatt. Anything, Techno, I just--"

"We don't want you to leave, bitch," Tommy hissed, and Techno was struck with the blowback that their words caused him.

We don't want you to leave.

Now that he looked for it, the fear and desparation in their eyes wasn't- it wasn't the kind that he was familiar with. It was the quiet, aching knowledge that losing him to a farm in a void had given them. It was the fact that he had left and they hadn't known until they wanted his help with something. Nobody had known.

Just like Phil, they wanted to keep an eye on him.

"I can't stay there the whole time," he said, and- that made them relax. It was the permission they wanted, the I'll go with you as long as not too mcuh has been going on, as long as I don't have to do what I don't want to do, even if it wasn't all they wanted. They still looked unhappy. But the tension in their shoulders that he hadn't noticed until now was gone. The tears ready to bead in Tommy's eyes had dissapeared.

"I'm not going to vanish," he said, and watched as their own expressions solidified. "You don't have to treat me like something that'll be gone at a moment's notice," he tried, but-well. He couldn't help the frustrated rumbling growl that left him, putting his head in his hands.

"Either you two or Phil will know where I am at all times," he murmured into the heels of his hands, "even if I'm not there. I can do check-ins. I'm mature enough to not get mad at that. But I draw the line at always being with one person. Two people. I'm an adult, Wil. Tommy. I am."

"We're not saying you're--"

"You're not saying it," he snapped at Tommy, childishly refusing to lower his hands, "but you're sure implying it. Stop. I don't care. Do your revolution thing but I'm not going to be your Blade, and I'm sure not going to be a prisoner in the server in all but word. Stop."

"But Techno- we- what if you--"

"I'm not going back to that island unless accompanied by someone, and I don't particularly want to go right now," he hissed, uncaring of the way it was still muffled. "And again, I'll tell someone what I want to do. Stop pretending it's about that. I know you just want firepower. And I'm saying- why does it matter anyways, what's happened? Why did you even let that server get to points like revolutions and real elections and exiles?"

"Techno-"

"No. You're going to let me speak." He lowered his hands. He glowered at them. He wasn't mad, could never be, not now- but he could sure be frustrated. "Why are you getting so passionate about a country? About a stupid ideal? That's supposed to be a server! For friends!"

"Dream's not my-"

"Then why did you join in the first place!"

They both just- stared at him.

"Why did you join," he said softly, and stared right back. "Other...other friends is not an excuse. I assume you were invited. Why. Why did you go?"

Dream's not my friend, the two had nearly said in unison. He felt the way that the tension in the air crackled and wondered, faintly, if there would ever be a proper conclusion to it all.

Or if something was going on, something higher than them all- but it was silly. There were only people and their dumb mistakes. There was only Wilbur and Tommy's perspectives shifting through colored lenses.

He wondered if he'd ever be able to take them off of their faces.

Techno stared down at his hands and picked at the nails, a sharp frown gracing his features. A quiet had fallen over their group, and he wasn't going to contest it- but he didn't look up. He wasn't going to break what had been created. He would breathe and he would figure things out and everything would be alright.

Wilbur and Tommy were just...they were just...confused. They got heated.

When he looked up, finally, the two were staring at each other. There was a conversation in their eyes, one that Techno couldn't make hide or hair of, and he thought about the usefulness of that skill, but also of the ways in which them sticking together had given them skills that Techno had never gained with anyone else, and-

They didn't turn to him even after another two, three minutes. His mouth set itself into a line.

"I'll give you an ultimatum," he said finally, and it rung like a bell across the room. His brothers flinched and turned towards him in unison, wide-eyed and caught off guard. They opened their mouths- and shut them at his raised hand.

"I'll give you one," he repeated, "and it's not a counteroffer. Not...not really. You either agree with this or I don't go with you." He had to ignore their sharp breaths, their glances to each other. He refused to feel any sort of remorse for this. "I come and go as I please," he said, and his frown tightened when they both looked- alarmed. "I will stay. But I will visit home. I'll visit whatever I want. I'm not going to spend all my time there."

"But-"

"No buts," he snapped, and watched Tommy's mouth click shut once more. His own hands were clenched on the table, nearly drawing blood from where his nails pressed sharply into his palms. "Take it or leave it, Tommy. I won't fight unless I want to. You can't make me do anything. I'll grow food. I'll help you stay in shape, if you want, but- I won't fight if I don't want. I won't spy. I won't even be fully allied with whatever nation idea you do, okay?" He huffed. "Governments...things often go wrong with those, Wil, Tommy." He paused. "As. Shown by what happened to you."

"L'manburg was-"

"According to you, L'manburg doesn't exist anymore," he said, harsh as a winter wind, and felt no remorse at the hurt gazes. (Maybe just a little bit.) "Take it or leave it. Those are my terms."

He stood up and stared down at them. He scanned their faces, the slight wrinkles in Wilbur's by his eyes, the bags under Tommy's. There was an angry flush on his younger brother and something distinctly unsettled in his older sibling's eyes.

Techno eyed them, opened his mouth to give one last parting shot- and reconsidered. There was no worth in poking fun at someone. At humiliating them, or lightening the situation.

Instead, he supposed he'd give them something to work with. Something to think on.

"If you try to bargain with me on this," he said quietly, "and add conditions I didn't say, change what I said, if you go against the spirit of it-"

Techno tilted his head slightly. Let his features catch the overhead light.

"If you do any of that," he said, "then the deal is off. I stay here. The argument is over. I don't say what I don't mean, especially with this."

He turned and walked away, walked to the kitchen, grabbed a fruit from a basket on the counter, meandered his way right into his room. The light filtered softly into it and he stretched with a yawn, eyes cast skyward as he thought mildly on, well. On what made a person. On the difference between his brothers and him.

He wondered if Phil would have liked what he said there.

He probably wouldn't ask. It was fine.

Everything was not fine.

Or, rather, Techno wasn't fine, not with the way he woke up in a cold sweat with a quiet, hoarse cry, arms reaching for something unknown. He stared at his hands, watched as they faded from bloodstained to clean and well-washed, and marvelled at the fact that- that he hadn't always been a killer.

Or, rather, that now he wasn't forced to do any of it.

There were a couple of things that he could do, awoken from a nightmare as he had. He could go out and fix himself some hot chocolate, some tea, some warm milk with honey and go back to sleep.

He could do that.

A restlessness lurked under his skin, though, something that drove Techno to stand and stretch and think quietly on what could be. He examined his body in the low light and found himself wanting. He didn't know if he wanted to run, or if he wanted to bloom in the light or if he wanted to- if he wanted to-

He took a deep breath and tried to settle his mind. There was no solace to be found in a chaos of mental space. There was a calmness to be found in tranquility, but that didn't exist here.

So instead, he stretched and he thought and he tried to figure out what he wanted to do to settle the beast lurking under his skin.

Hah. The beast.

He was one, wasn't he?

Techno migrated out of his room and into the bathroom, turning the light on once he closed the door. With his shirt chucked off he looked at himself in the mirror, examined what made him, well, him- and tried to not pick at everything he saw. He rolled his shoulders and watched as the muscle there, built up at least a little bit from after he had been found by Phil, pulled and stretched and how the scars there shifted. Some were thin, old and warped by growth, while others still sat heavy upon his skin.

There was still his bad knee, the one that liked to ache. There were the larger scars that all wanted to complain. There were, on a closer review, a number of smaller cuts and scars and pinpricks along his hands, from embroidery or sharpening knives or just using them daily.

He had called himself a monster to Phil, that day in the apartment, musing over his failings and the contracts he had gone through. There was all that Phil knew that his brothers had never been privy to, from years ago up until now, and he was- he was someone he could confide in. But hadn't he talked to him about it before? About an aversion to violence, about the persona he had carried on in Hypixel, about the precise way that marketing yourself as a killer that could be softened could wreck parts of your psyche?

Although. Hah.

He wouldn't call it ruining his psyche. There was malicious intent and then there was intent in regards to profit. There was wanting to make the best bucks by spinning a special narrative. There was the way in which Quartz had utilized the clothing he liked to wear most often, how they watched his fighting style and then tailored his whole persona around his feats, there was the way that they had crafted him into something that was him but wasn't in so many other damned ways-

...Maybe it had ruined his, ah, psyche, come to think of it.

If it hadn't, maybe Techno's restless thoughts wouldn't have come to pinpoint that part of his life just from thinking of his scars.

Some were from daily life. Others were from his childhood. Others still were from the matches that Quartz had pushed on him from contract, or ones that Techno had gone into on his own terms.

The door creaked open. He glanced over to see Phil there, watching him with the eyes of someone that understood, somewhat, what was going on. He quirked a tired smile in return, turned back, and extended his arms, twisting them in full view of the mirror to examine just how- how messed up it all was.

"Fancy seeing you here," Phil said quietly, and Techno quirked something of a smile. "Woke me up, opening the doors. Just went to sleep."

"S'rry for wakin' you," he murmured, cracking his knuckles and taking a closer look at his palms, roughened from working on the island, from not keeping up any kind of a routine after being rescued. If he tried to remember, he thought- he almost thought that his palms, that his hands were supposed to be softened instead of calloused.

There was something nice in knowing that his hands were used for actual work. For working the fields, for embroidery, for...for...

Well. He'd say for fighting, but he supposed that would have been when his hands had been soft. Back then, with Quartz, with memories of a skin regimen and specific sponsored products and makeup and-

"You're mumbling," Phil murmured, and Techno gave a soft start.

There was a vulnerability to the night, to having your skin thrum with such energy that you knew something had to change. He breathed in and Phil's hand fell to rest on his shoulder. He closed his eyes and imagined the energy discharging into thin air but could only really think of that point of grounding contact given to him by his brother.

"This reminds me of something, you know." Phil's fingers, his hand squeezed Techno's shoulder lightly. He hummed in response, too tired to speak much, too keyed up to focus overmuch but spreading his attention out over everything he could feel. "We were in here when you first got here," he continued, and that spread focus also started to close its attention just to one spot, almost like his sense of touch already had. "Remember? Your hair had so

much dirt in it, even though I think you washed it in those rivers...so much stuff just wouldn't get off of your skin, or your hair, or under your nails..."

"Braided hair," Techno said distantly, one hand reaching up to comb through his currently loose hair. "You...you braided."

"I braided it," he agreed. "Would...would you like me to do that again? Is that alright with you? Is everything alright?"

No. Everything wasn't alright. But the atmosphere had gotten slower with his brother's appearance, and the unspent energy was at least settling itself somewhat like a lazy cat that had found a sunbeam to lay in. He hummed idly and motioned to his hair, motioned to the room, motioned to Phil.

"Let's go...maybe to the couch for this. It'll be more comfortable. I can get us some water, okay? Or would you like something else?"

Anything else felt too complicated. But- Phil's talk of water seemed nice. It made him think of a parched throat. It would wash away the blood he almost thought he could taste if he spaced out enough, thick on his tongue in all the ways he hadn't wanted it to be.

Techno rather thought that spending the night with his brother braiding his hair, getting some water, letting all that energy out into the night air while they both wound down-

That would be nice. That really would be nice.

He hummed his feelings to his brother, let them both drift out into the hallway and into the front, the living room- and he stood there as Phil left to go get water, brought back to the moment. He wasn't drifting, not like he had been when he was brought here from the island, not like he had been all the time in Hypixel. He was very much present- and he breathed everything in with the air of a man that wanted every cool speck of air in his lungs. He quirked a small smile and thought of the way that Phil handled him- a brother, an equal, respectful while still knowing a hint of the circumstances that had them both up at night.

And he found himself sitting on the floor, back against the couch, while Phil quietly fixed up his hair, pulling it into a comforting braid that he could feel but wasn't too tight.

Phil made small talk while he combed his fingers through Techno's hair, while he braided it in something just a bit higher of a style than the most basic braid.

"Nightmares?"

An affirmative hum.

"I feel you," Phil murmured. "That shit sucks."

Blood, scars, monsters and killing people and the way that he wanted to get sick and run away after all was done- Quartz and photoshoots and the way they always made him put makeup over his facial scars as if there was something they wanted him to hide from the world-

Techno sighed. In an echo of him before, Phil gave much the same hum as Techno had done a few minutes ago.

They sat in silence. Phil was taking longer than he needed to. That was fine.

Finally, a reason to speak: "My scars," he said, and paused.

"Mm? What about them."

"Do you..." He hummed as he tried to figure out what to say, both lethargic and letting that energy still run. "Are they scary? To you?"

Techno stared listlessly up at the ceiling, at the way he could just barely see Phil's form. He tilted his head and listened to the way that Phil's breath caught as if surprised. He listened and listened and listened- but Phil's sigh afterwards just seemed...sad.

He wondered why.

"Not in the way you'd think," Phil admitted, tying off the braid with a little band and just running his hands over Techno's hair afterwards, gently massaging the scalp. He felt, almost, like a cat left to sit in the sun and soak up everything to his delight.

Although the joy wasn't there. He was just- concerned. "Mmm?"

"You always got yourself into danger," Phil said quietly. "You...when you grew up, you had to fight. And then you kept fighting, and...to get these scars...you kept collecting them, Techno. And. I never confirmed it with you, not really, but there's only one way to get them all to stick, right?"

"To never die," Techno murmured, a slow drawl, a slant to his mouth that spoke of dry amusement. "Th' Blade never dies."

"The Blade never dies," Phil echoed. His fingernails scratched lightly at Techno's scalp. It was- he- this was nice. It was almost like his energy was slowly melting away in how Phil did it. "And so they healed...more or less naturally. With potions."

"Mmmhm."

"I don't know whether that's better than you dying or not and respawning. I don't know what would have been better on you. But...but you've never died in a world. Ever. Right? Not even in practice."

He shook his head. Closed his eyes. He focused on the smells of home, everything he never noticed and still never really did, the knowledge thrumming through him that home just merged into every other smell there was, besides the faint other floral scent that liked to cling to Phil.

"Don't wanna die," he murmured.

They sat in silence for a minute, two, three. He let his breath whistle in and out of his lungs.

“But you don’ think they’re...scary. Like. Scary scary.”

“No, Techno. I don’t.”

“...Why?” He let a hand reach up to his face to where a long scar curled over his cheek, nearly to his nose, and let his head tip further back against Phil. “...Look like a monster, or so they said. Wore a lot of makeup.”

“Makeup.”

“Photoshoots...fights. Everything. Makeup. Scary without it.”

Phil’s hands grew heavier for a second before they lightened up, stilling on his head. “That’s not good of them,” Phil said, but- it felt like he was speaking through some kind of cotton barrier, some kind of a veil that separated them. Techno huffed out a laugh.

“M a piglin hybrid, that’s what happens,” he said, and let that laugh continue on, small little chuckles that grew into his chest shaking, shaking, heaving with something that wasn’t tears but bordered on something similar. “Too scary for others, ‘specially as I grew up. Lots of makeup. Special clothes. Y’know. Exposed skin photoshoots...more makeup.” He paused. “Or...special effects,” he offered, like it was better. “Fake.”

“The scars aren’t- you aren’t a monster.”

“But you found me ‘n th’ Nether,” he pointed out, and the hands left his head completely, presumably to be put on Phil’s face in dismay instead.

“Techno,” he said. He hummed back in a lazy response. “You’re not- I- someone went in there and made you, okay? You know how reproduction works.” Of course he did. Techno didn’t bother to give that a response. “You- you just lived there, okay? I’ve heard talk of some people living in similar climates on other worlds, or going out far enough that it’s similar, or, or- some people have made it their life’s work to live there, okay? Does it make them a monster?”

Why would it? They were just humans, right?

“That’s not- I- agh,” Phil hissed when he pointed that out. “That’s not what I meant.”

“Living in the Nether,” he said to Techno, “isn’t- doesn’t make you like that. Scars you get from living there don’t make you scary. They just mean that you survived whatever gave you them, okay?” A sigh. “It just...it shows how long you’ve been here, been alive, to get this far. It shows how strong you are.” He could just hear a faint smile in Phil’s voice. “Not in a combat kind of way, just- strength of...character. Of being.”

“Oh,” he said, only comprehending part of it, something grand and vague but at least along the lines of what Phil really meant. “Oh.”

“Yeah, Techno. Oh is right.”

“I don’t want to fall back asleep,” Techno murmured.

“...I’ll be right here, whether you do or not.”

“Y’r always here,” he responded back, lips twitching upwards. “Of...of course.”

“None of us hate you, Techno,” Phil said out of the blue a minute later. He opened his eyes, half in shock, to watch the darkness of the wooden ceiling above them. “...The scars won’t make us hate you. Anything you don’t remember or don’t want us to know won’t make us hate you. ...You’re still my younger brother. Stuff like that doesn’t matter.”

Silence.

“Just...just don’t go,” Phil pleaded, quiet and soft and with a tremor in the strong voice of his. “Please. Not...just don’t go, okay? For good. I don’t want you to disappear like that again.”

“...Tommy and Wilbur,” he whispered into the dark, “want me to go with them to Dream’s world. I gave them an ultimatum. They...haven’t gotten back to me on it.”

“Oh, Techno. Oh, oh, Techno.” Phil breathed in. Out. In. His hands moved back to Techno’s head. “Are you going to go there? Permanently?”

Techno considered it for a long moment and gave a listless sound, something considering, something mild. “Mmm.”

“I just- really- it’s fine, I just want to make sure that-“

“No.”

“...What?”

“Not staying there permanently,” he said. Despite the quiet, low tone of his voice, the sound filled the room and lingered there. “...Don’t want to. Want to stay here more.”

“Here.”

A confirming hum.

Phil fell quiet again. Techno didn’t break the blanket of silence that fell over them, long enough that his eyes fell shut and he slowly got drowsier and drowsier, slowly lulled to sleep by the thoughtful passing of Phil’s hands over his hair.

“I’m glad,” he almost thought he heard Phil say as he slipped into slumber, mind refusing to parse any of the words being said anymore. He thought that maybe a blanket was thrown over him, that Phil fell back asleep on the couch nearby- but that was a thought for another day, a more aware Techno.

For now, he let himself embrace the void of no thoughts.

What kind of a person did he want to be?

It was a question that plagued him as he considered the basic pancakes being made on the pan, flipping them once Phil had made sure he wouldn't burn down the house. There was a nice routine in it all- check the sides, flip it over, pass it to the plate. Juggling a few of them at once wasn't too bad.

Phil had gone for a bit of a catnap at the dining table, clearly tired from something he didn't quite feel ready to think on some more, a night of quiet conversation and shared confessions. His other two brothers were nowhere to be seen.

So he made pancakes. Enough for four, if it was so wanted. It gave him precious time to think.

Well, he thought mildly- I can be a brother. I can help those I care for. But I...there's more in life than just embroidery and helping others and growing things, right? The person I used to be was competitive enough to have a war over potatoes, right? And to like fighting someone else who was strong enough to match me?

Who do I want to be? Who? Who?

He heard movement from somewhere. He watched the sizzling of the pan and deftly turned over one nicely-done pancake before moving it to the plate and pouring in some more batter. There were no batches. There were just three different pancakes on the very large pan at different times cooking. He lived on the edge, he supposed.

What hobbies did one like to collect after losing a chunk of their memory and only getting some of them back? How could he know exactly what brought him joy? He didn't want to re-explore everything. He wanted to know what he wanted to do.

But that was impossible.

Flip another pancake over and out. Flip another to its other side. Breathe and pour in some more batter.

He wanted to have connections with others, but it was impossible to parse exactly what he was to do. Did he reconnect with Dream? Did he try and reach back out to Schlatt, the enemy of his brothers at the moment? Did he stand in his own little garden and try to not lose himself again?

There's only so many things you can do, something in him murmured, unkind and sinister. Only so many things possible before you go back to the bloody life you lived before. At least Quartz gave you structure.

No. There was a structure to gardening. There was an art in caring for other things, something lovely in nurturing new varieties of potatoes to life among other animals. There was still joy to be found in the unexpected biting of a fish, or figuring out what to do with the day and not just...doing nothing.

There was never nothing to do, not really.

Maybe he could learn a new skill. Do a few new things that neither him or his past self had done. Repay the favors to Schlatt and he was a free man, unbidden to either him or Quartz, and- and he knew he had enough money to use in Hypixel's sphere to pay for anything he ever wanted. He had the skills of embroidery, rusty as they now were, to pay for his life even if he ran out of money. Somehow.

And he didn't think he wanted to be a big spender.

Dance until you find a new partner in life. Spin until the tables are turned and look down upon those that once looked down at you. Farm and don't get lost. Keep remembering.

More pancakes. More batter. More shuffling. He glanced to the side and saw a sleepy Tommy at the entrance to the kitchen, staring at the pancakes as if entranced.

"Plate," he said, and watched Tommy's eyes snap to his as if in alarm. He turned back to the pan and saved a pancake from burning. "Take some. Eat. Phil is in the dining room. Bring some to him."

"Techno," Tommy said, and he almost seemed- breathless. Techno snorted.

"Plate," he repeated, and gestured to the four set out on the side. "Making pancakes. Just eat."

"So me and Wil-"

"Tommy," he gritted out, and his steel-cold tone must have at least awakened some good form of fight or flight response in him, because he at least started to get to work grabbing plates and putting a few pancakes on each. "Syrup on table. Butter, too. Get Phil a plate. Wil, too. There's enough for everyone and more." A pause. "After I finish."

"Okay, okay," Tommy snapped, "Prime, geez-"

"Food," he said, a bit more patient now, and let Tommy work around him. The last of the batter went into the pan once there was a space for it. Now, time was ticking for when he would finish. "Good."

"You're a bitch," Tommy called out once he passed into the dining room, and Techno could only roll his eyes.

A bitch he was. Sure. He didn't exactly care about that.

But he cared about the tired, pleased noise that Phil made once he saw the food and utensils. He cared about the way that his hair was still braided, and the way that Tommy delighted in yelling for Wilbur, the way that his other older brother groaned back as he shambled into the area-

Techno didn't know who he wanted to be. He doubted he ever fully would.

At least he'd have a safety net to tide him by while he figured that part out for himself.

And some pancakes. The pancakes were good. He couldn't discount that.

Of course not.

Techno had been given the feeling that he was standing on a precipice for a while now. It hadn't been jarring, but he had felt that cliff's edge and had been toeing at it for weeks now, since the middle of his stay at Hypixel, since arriving back home. It's a feeling that bubbles up in his lungs and threatens to choke him out when he thinks about it too much, so he doesn't.

Instead, he does something at least somewhat more productive: he plans.

Or, rather, thinks. Thinking is a big part of planning.

Techno stretched, popping some of his bones with a large yawn that was probably not entirely like a placebo. He ran a hand through his unkempt hair, sat at his desk as he was, and considered the notebook and its pages in front of him, written on recently with writing even worse than normal.

Writing, as it turned out, for the first real time in months- it doesn't typically end very well, especially when wounds gained over time make your hands shake.

It didn't matter. At least he had a mostly-legible chicken scratch...outline of what he had to do.

Or what he wanted to do. It was the same thing in some ways.

Juggling priorities was a balancing act he'd have to do from now on, even if it was bundled up into one giant wish- to be there for his family and protect them in absence of any other motives. 'Discover more about your past life' was also a bullet point, thin and shaky, but it didn't matter as much.

They'd have to contact Dream to get him into the server.

That was something both Tommy and Wilbur had come to him separately to inform him of, annoyed worry in their voices about the fact.

"He'll want to see you in person, the prick," Wilbur had told him the day prior, lounging in his bed as if he owned the room and everything in it. Techno had thrown some non-breakable item at him and watched as he dodged it.

"That bitch--" Tommy, on the other hand, had barely gotten together some form of a coherent sentence, mostly in his annoyance. And exhaustion, given the fact that he had come to tell Techno that as some sort of a midnight revelation. He had ruffled his younger brother's hair and sent him on his way.

But that was still a dilemma. Meeting Dream. He would know who Techno was at first glance, and if Tommy and Wilbur told him that he was their brother, which they would probably have to- hm.

Techno didn't like it.

More importantly, he supposed, Phil didn't like it when he laid out the plan in front of him over an early breakfast, their other brothers sleeping in and passed out in their respective rooms. They considered the scratchy, short list in his notebook with nothing even close to detachment. Perhaps it was the opposite.

He slid the notebook closer after Phil heaved a sigh. His brother returned his level look with a glare and a mutter of "You shit" that Techno gracefully ignored. He couldn't ignore the way that he shook his head, though, tired and annoyed and just outright...done.

"It's a plan," he said, and got glared at yet again. "I'm just saying," he continued on, voice a flat drone, "that it's better than anything else we have. There's no way that he won't figure out who I am."

"Do you not want him to know?"

He stared.

Phil raised an eyebrow back at him.

"It depends," he drawled at Techno, the heaviness of sleep slowly lifting from his voice with every bite of cereal he took, "on what you want. It'll probably make things a hell of a lot more difficult on Wil 'n Tommy if Dream figures it out, but who cares? It's what you want."

Techno considered that. He turned it over in his mind and examined the statements as Phil crawled through a few more bites, head tilting listlessly to the side as he gave a considering hum.

"I guess it doesn't matter," he said thoughtfully, "if it'll be found out anyways. But it... should probably be handled carefully."

"You thought of contacting him yourself instead of going through your brothers?"

What?

"Not having them ask and explain that they have a brother who wants in, first," Phil elaborated at the confused prompting look. "Just. Come as Techno. Even if that causes a lot of shock because you just messaged him."

"Ever since things..."

"Ever since that happened," Phil said, and Techno shot him a twist of his mouth that could perhaps pass as a smile in the middle of a funeral. "It's...probably better than him being shocked when you first see him face to face, if they're the ones asking for the meeting. Pull the trigger."

"I suppose," he said, a filler phrase if anything, and clasped his hands together with a sharp frown changing his expression soon after. "I suppose."

They stewed in silence. Techno was a pot, something ready to boil- but it's something quiet and unobtrusive, not the rolling boil of anger and frustration.

"I don't know what to do." His words were plain. There's no optimism or pessimism glazing his syllables, gracing his breath. He stated his thoughts as they were, and what they were was...well.

"You have time," Phil said, more than a little wry. "You don't have to go there the same time they do, after all."

And wasn't that a thought?

There was only so long that Tommy and Wilbur could have escaped the allure of their fancy revolution, brewed up in a ravine that Techno's pretty sure they're both dumbasses for living in, probably sugarcoated in their remarks to him and Phil. They were both horrifically stupid if they wanted to be, but- well- in a world such as the one they lived in, they were perfectly fine in wanting to just go back to that server and duke it out, even if it was a colossal waste of time when you could spend time with friends and family elsewhere.

Eh. He couldn't really judge. He was the one that had pushed himself into farming many more potatoes than could possibly be contained in a world if he had stockpiled them all. He was the one who had turned to escapism within escapism.

He could give them that, at least.

But the scene of their departure was something more somber than Techno had thought it would be. They had bags all packed, everything all ready- but they stared at Techno like if they thought not seeing him would mean that he was lost forever, and he stared back with a similar kind of energy.

They hadn't left for so long. For what had to be- he- he couldn't keep track of time accurately, but a few months at minimum, half a year maximum, although he doubted it had been that long, really.

Maybe it had been four months since he was found by Phil, maybe five, but- that wasn't what mattered. He had to keep his mind on track.

What mattered was that his brothers were leaving, they were both skittish about the approach he had chosen to take with Dream, and they were anxious enough that they both made him promise them- separately- that he'd send them a message at least once a day.

Wilbur ribbed at him lightly as they milled about the house in anticipation of leaving. Breakfast had been simple, light, not wanting to disturb their stomachs too much on intra-world travel. All of his brothers had been awake soon after he had started making something, and- and they were hesitant to leave.

"What a group we make," he said simply as they all stood outside the house, Phil and him on the porch while Wilbur and Tommy stood on the path out to the waypoint at the edge of the land.

“Yeah,” Wilbur snorted, and gave them a shit-eating grin to match his somewhat slouched posture. “The revolutionaries, the amnesiac-“

“-and the man on world arrest,” Tommy cut in, cackling in a very...Tommy-esque way, if Techno had to select words to describe it. It was almost impossible to figure out what else there truly was to say, he supposed.

“There’s no such thing as world arrest, you little shit,” Phil snapped, although no anger was found in his voice. Only a tired kind of fondness. A sadness that the family that had been together for weeks was finally separating again.

“House arrest, whatever, but the private server version of that,” Tommy said, a grin to match Wilbur’s right next to him. “Does it matter?”

“A few more months for this world to stabilize and I’m going to kick your ass no matter where you are,” Phil said, promise hanging like a threat in his voice- and that was enough of that for Techno’s day. He didn’t want to focus on banter, not right now. Not when he was standing on the cliff of terrifying change.

He had to throw his cards onto the table, so to speak.

“I’ll miss you two,” he said, and watched as the entire mood shifted in a way that he could only describe as. Quiet. “I will,” he said, because it deserved to be said. There was the reaction he expected to get- his brothers all staring at him like he was an alien, which made him squirm, which made him think I’m not really their brother I’m just an impostor and they’ll figure it out one day but-

“We’ll miss you, too, bitch,” Tommy said, the insult offset by the way that he genuinely seemed to choke up. “You better not take too fuckin’ long, okay? Maybe you aren’t fighting and shit, but you need to come see Pogtopia. It’s cooler than you think it is. I swear. We swear.”

“I don’t swear anything,” Wilbur snipped, bringing Tommy close in sort of a half-ruffle half-noogie gesture, and Techno arched his eyebrows mildly at the two of them. A glance at him from Wilbur- “Hey, what’s that for?”

“Just watching,” Techno said, mild as the honeyed milk that was waiting for him inside. “It’s a real comedy show from where I’m standing.”

“Well, just wait til’ you see the buffoons that are our enemies,” Wilbur said, rolling his eyes, and Techno could just feel the force of it from where he stood. He just gave a small smile in response. “Gods, I wonder if Schlatt still calls Quackity ‘flatty patty’, that’ll be hilarious, seriously-“

“You’ll miss every meal of today at this rate,” Phil said, and nodded towards the waypoint that opened up access to the rest of the worldly sphere that they sat in, a server under Hypixel’s licensing influence and reach to the rest of the system. “Thought you were going to have lunch with someone there.”

“Niki and Tubbo,” Tommy confirmed- and Techno idly checked the time on his communicator, a motion that was a simple twitch of the hands.

“Better get going, then.” Techno let his eyes get soft. Let his voice go a bit softer in turn, slur a bit more when he didn’t try to control his pronunciation. “I’ll see you soon.”

“Define soon.”

“Soon enough,” he told Tommy, and relished in the quiet amusement that his younger brother’s self-contained rioting gave him. “Shoo. I want to have the peace and quiet that I’ve wanted ever since you two came here and burst my bubble.”

“Fuck you-“

He waved as Wilbur dragged Tommy along, and- just to spite Tommy, who had his body turned to face them while Wilbur just kept going along- waved until the point at which they turned to access the wavepoint, turned back one more time to get a good look at them, and- vanished.

Techno dropped his arm.

Quiet fell over the two of them.

“Guess I have to message Tea- Dream, soon,” he said, quiet in the almost somber silence, Phil a comforting presence at his side.

“Guess you do have to,” Phil agreed.

The two of them stood there, not willing to leave the liminal space they had unwittingly entered into, a space between the then of all four of them being in one space and the upcoming now that would be them re-entering a house where Tommy and Wilbur weren’t staying in anymore.

“I think I want to stay out here for a while longer,” Techno murmured, and Phil hummed right along him. They slipped into the porch’s chairs as if they belonged there and watched the horizon for minutes that felt like they stretched out into days, ponderous and wavering.

“They’re gone,” he said.

“Yeah, Techno.” Phil’s response was barely above a whisper. “They’re gone.”

It took a while for the two of them to brave the ordeal of going back inside and facing the reality that had been locking eyes with them ever since they had woken up.

A few more minutes, Techno thought. Just a few more minutes.

It took two hours of contemplation for the two of them to re-enter the house, quiet as mice.

And then there were two.

It was perfectly understandable that he wasn't going to act instantly on his knowledge of what to do, who to call, what to say to get into Dream's server. It was fine that he stood around and tended to his plants and slipped back into a proper orbit with Phil, nobody around to disturb the fine balance that was set.

It was a nice callback to...he wouldn't quite call it another time, but it was reminiscent of what happened after Techno had been found and taken back home mixed with how they had interacted in what he remembered of growing up with Phil and Wilbur. They knew how much space to give each other without asking, especially impressive considering how much had changed even in the small months that had come between him leaving and coming back from Hypixel.

It was, dare he say it, nice.

Techno could try and fool someone by saying that his purpose for staying to himself and not even trying to contact Dream was for his brothers to get settled in further before anything happened. It would be the truth, but only a sliver of it, and he was never the best liar unless it was by omission. Not that he could lie about something so particular that way, anyhow.

Him and Phil took mornings slow, if early, nursing coffee and tea as they both woke up. There was always something to do, together or apart, and no matter if it brought him close to Phil or not, it was nice to not have a pressure on him to talk.

They were quiet, those first few days.

Even if his communicator wasn't.

Tommy was the most frequent annoyer, while Wilbur seemed to pick and choose the times that he talked with Techno in a more selective manner. There was always something to talk about when he messaged, rather than the blander badgering of Tommy.

But he answered them both, at the very least once a day, and often quirked a smile at whatever they sent in even if he didn't answer it back at that very moment.

[Wilbur]: How'd you deal with Dream, anyways? He's been an asshole this whole time. Looked over all our stuff even if there's nothing that's really, like, contraband or anything.

[Wilbur]: Took us an hour and a half to even get out of the community house with the way he wanted to go through paperwork, of all things. Prick.

He always had been a little controlling, hadn't he, Techno thought mildly in the middle of the night, mixing together hot chocolate with a sleep-heavy hand. A little picky over things I bought regarding embroidery.

Not like his thoughts were based on barely-remembered wisps of a life that had long since been lived or anything, but whatever.

[techno]: That's just...how he is.

[Wilbur]: I know. And that's just the problem, isn't it.

He didn't have to be told twice.

Tommy's messages, on the other hand, varied in importance from bees to complaints about Dream to very serious comments interspersed with insults.

[Tommy]: HEY BITCGH

[Tommy]: GUESS WHO SAW TUBBO

[Tommy]: thats right ME

[Tommy]: AND HE'S BEEN TURNED INTO A YES MAN

Sigh. He could deal with the barrage. He could. He really could.

He couldn't, it turned out, when his communicator was regularly waking him up with alert pings in the middle of perfectly fine sleep just because Tommy was doing this or that, either on a different time schedule or simply very, ah, awake when he should be sleeping, thank you very much Wilbur for enabling that kind of thing with an impressionable young child.

It was always something dumb. It was always needless, or stupid, or just- something that Techno thought he'd be bothered about if they were both in a lonely kitchen together.

He drew the line at sleep being interrupted, though, pissy and irritable as he stared up at his dark ceiling for the eighth time in half as many nights. The culprit stealing all of his sleep away from him?

[Tommy]: do u think that youd survive more than a minute of being under th ewater bictb

Gods. Gods, how he hated this child. Oh, how he wanted to barge into the server he was in just to get it into his mind that this was not the right time, no time he was sleeping was the right time and he had to know that from how often he was waking Techno and-

Or, he thought rather blankly, he could turn off alarms until he woke up.

It was a realization that made him roll over in bed, thoroughly tangled by his sheets, and try to scream a hole in his pillow.

Thankfully- or perhaps not thankfully- Phil didn't wake up from the noise. He grumbled miserably into the pillow and lazily shifted a hand and twisted it half to the side, making a minorly complex gesture- and it all went quiet.

He was the dumb one. Fuck.

At least, he thought blearily the next morning, it was something for Phil to laugh at over breakfast as Techno recounted the details. For Techno's part, he just propped up one half of his face on a hand, leaned against it, and lazily took bites of the toast with avocado that he had bothered to make while Phil partook of a meal made up of leftovers.

“Breakfast of champions, by the way,” he droned after Phil was done sniggering at him for his forgetfulness, and watched as another round of cackling laughter ensued. He just blinked, took a sip of his tea, and went on with his day.

There really was only so long that he could ignore the necessity of contacting Dream.

He didn’t want to do it. That in and of itself was probably the biggest reason it had been put off for so long. Why wouldn’t he want to not do it, anyhow? Why should he have to contact the biggest not negative presence from his Hypixel days and hash out his whole story again to someone who didn’t even know how he had disappeared in the first place?

But, well. A week and a half after his brothers had left for the server and they were at a breaking point, even threatening dragging Dream over to do the deed of telling him themselves.

And Techno wasn’t going to allow that. Fuck.

And so it was with a pit in his stomach that he laid down on the couch, no comforting tea to be had, and flipped through his contacts to the latest message Dream had sent, still under that self-set moniker of Teach in his contacts- the message sent all of two days ago.

Ugh.

[teach]: Those two that left unexpectedly came back the other day. They’re hiding something from me but I don’t know what, which is frustrating, but, well

[teach]: I can deal with it.

[teach]: I’ve been in contact with the nation they fled and, well, seems like everything’s starting back up again. Been a few months of pretty damn near radio silence everywhere. Everyone’s been working on building things.

[teach]: The nation built some pretty impressive...office buildings? Skyscrapers? They’re not big enough to be proper skyscrapers, the ones that we know but

[teach]: Basically skyscrapers for this area.

[teach]: They’re all so fascinating.

[teach]: Although I’ve talked about those buildings already. Running out of stuff to talk about isn’t all that fun. This must be

[teach]: The fifth time or something I’ve mentioned them?

[teach]: Whatever

[teach]: I’ll show you them someday.

And silence.

Scrolling up held a wealth of knowledge about the server, as vague as it was to not really mention any names. Nations, biased accountings of them all, descriptions of members to boot including one that described Tommy as the annoying little kid that keeps chasing me around, just fighting with him over some discs so he doesn't do any shit that's more annoying than that.

Hah.

But....well.

How would he respond to Techno coming out of the woodwork just to meet up with him and try to...join the server, or whatever? Even if, looking back, Dream had mentioned wanting to at least show him around? Possibly get him on his side?

...Techno, ah, at least hoped it didn't go too badly.

He was alone. Phil was out tending to his part of the garden, mostly full of plants that Techno thought were too boring to grow or were just plants he didn't care for. He could shout if he needed help- but he didn't, he thought, already subvocalizing a reply without too much thought to Tea- to Dream.

It was simple. Almost deceptively so. He reviewed it- and touched his pinky and thumb finger together on one hand to send it off.

The ball's in your court now, Dream.

[techno]: Sooner than someday, perhaps.

And to the sound of nothing pinging him but a specialized blip in his head that signified his brothers- especially Tommy- Techno went back to going about his day.

The ball was, indeed, back in Dream's court.

He just wondered what he was going to do with it.

It was in the middle of lunch only, what, two hours later?- that he got a message back. His back went ramrod straight as he noticed exactly who had sent the message- his eyes widened, shoulders straightened, and he made Phil inhale some water down the wrong pipe.

He didn't apologize. He was too busy examining what Dream had sent back in his mind's eye.

[teach]: Who is this.

So it was that route, huh?

[teach]: Prove you're him.

[teach]: NOW.

"Impatient," he muttered to himself almost on instinct. He ignored Phil's curious look at him and flicked a finger to start replying.

[techno]: Don't know why I have to prove myself that way

[teach]: You know why.

[techno]: What, you want something only you know? Or I know about you or me? What? Any kind of questions you want to ask?

He took a lazy bite of his sandwich, eyes unfocused in front of him. The little blips in his mind, the data and the communicator and the chatlog- nothing visual, but ever-present all the same- almost consumed him.

There was still food he had to eat.

Techno took another bite.

[teach]: Fuck it. Yeah, I do have a question.

[teach]: Why did you wear a mask whenever we met?

And he nearly choked on it as it went down.

"Mate, you alright?" There was a bit of genuine almost panic in Phil's voice, clearly focused not just on the near-choke but also on the wide-eyed look Techno sported. He managed to get the food down before he rubbed at his eyes, shaking his head along with it. "Techno? Tech?"

"I'm fine," he managed to get out after a gulp of tea, sitting back in his chair to process the absurdity of the question. "Just- talking with Dream."

"...Techno."

Gods. Shit. Now he had a hell of a conversation on both sides.

Perhaps it was on him that he immediately went on the defensive. "What, Phil? I can't talk to someone I used to know? I can't reintroduce myself to him or something and try reconnecting in some way? Why're you lookin' at me like that?"

"I'm not looking at you 'like that,'" Phil said, a bit of a rotten undertone to his voice. They both stared at each other, a beneign lunch turned almost hostile, and Techno tried to get his emotions back under control. Tried to breathe through it. "Don't act like I'm mad at you just for fucking talking to someone, Techno. I'd have appreciated it if you had told one of us about it before, though!"

"I don't have to tell you everything I'm doing, Phil! Give me some actual privacy for once in my life now!"

His shout echoed in the room. It bounced off the rafters and left him almost looming over the table, stood up with shoulders hunched over and a snarl on his face. Belatedly, Techno

realized that his throat hurt very much.

Techno took a deep breath. He forcibly relaxed his shoulders in the bare silence and refused to fully look at Phil's expression. If he had to wager a guess, they would both look the same; feeling awful for treading on arguments they had already sort of had about similar circumstances. About secrets. About hiding.

Maybe Phil had that kicked puppy kind of look on his face. Techno wasn't going to glance at it.

"Thanks for the lunch," he said woodenly. He picked up his plate and his drink, took a long, slow breath, and paced out of the room.

He rather thought that the meal would be nicer in his bedroom.

And he could deal with this a lot easier alone.

[teach]: Ten.

[teach]: Nine.

[teach]: Eight.

[techno]: I didn't ever wear a mask

[techno]: You were the one to wear the mask, not me, and you never told me why.

[teach]: Hm.

[techno]: That good enough for you?

[teach]: No.

Gods. It seemed that time hadn't done any favors for his temperament, even if Techno wanted to cherry pick some of the more acerbic memories. He took a rather sullen bite of his sandwich in the silent room, listened for footsteps, and sunk a bit further into his desk chair when he heard nothing.

[techno]: Another question, then.

[teach]: Algiz. What's your theory about concealment.

Fuck. Shit. It wasn't like he cursed often, but that was a subject that made him run his tongue over his teeth anxiously, almost wanting to grind them together where possible. Algiz. What was that, again? That rune?

His memories on the subject were muddied. He had begun to work on it again, but his theory seemed far weaker than his muscle memory on more basic enchantments, and it made Techno want to lay back and scream at the world.

But it was familiar, in a way. The name. The mention of concealment. He just had to think, which was far more of an ordeal than it probably seemed. Had to sort though it all and figure out what was going on and-

-and it clicked.

[techno]: A modifier chain on Algiz to tell it that it protects itself through hiding as long as you add the intent. Depends on the rune variants.

He just had to sell it.

[techno]: How is that harder. Getting old, Dream?

Perfect. Just the nice little garnish of fancy greens on top that he needed to really show that it was him.

[teach]: Oh, fuck you

[teach]: And fuck me I guess

[teach]: It's really you?

A sigh.

[techno]: It's really me, nerd.

[teach]: Not a nerd.

[teach]: One more.

He took a very controlled bite of his sandwich so he didn't feel the urge to rip the little communicator chip out of his back.

[techno]: Shoot.

[teach]: Name something I've cooked you that you liked.

Had he ever cooked something for him?

Had Techno never remembered?

[techno]: Cooked air did me just fine, thanks.

[teach]: Cooked air. Really.

[techno]: What can I say. I only love my cooking.

[teach]: Asshole.

Techno finished up the sandwich, ignored the urge to lick his fingers, and sat back to close his eyes and focus on the conversation. He could hear more things going on around the

house, but that wasn't any kind of an issue; from what distance it was from, it seemed Phil was back in the kitchen, cleaning up.

This was the tipping point. He nearly held his breath in anticipation of something, anything-[teach]: Where have you been for so long, Techno? What the hell?

The wind whistled through Techno's hair as he looked over the fruits of his labor, mouth in a thin line. There was activity, sure- the ever-present hum of the minions behind him, the swirling of the hub portals he had set up- but it felt as if time had almost stopped in the moment it had took for him to breathe, long and slow.

This set-up would be good to push past Squid's backlog of potatoes, surely. But just to rub it in— no, not rub it in, just to make sure everything was as intended— he'd go and check. Make sure those minions of his were doing as bad as they could be.

He smiled just a hair, a fracture right along that thin line, and turned to walk through the portals, to twitch his hand and communicate to the server to disguise him with a thin veil of anonymity.

Ah, Skyblock. Revolutionary technology just used for an escapist game where everyone goes to be by themselves, huh?

As to be expected from Hypixel.

A veil, different skin, different basic public ID. Something that would have never been allowed in Hypixel itself, but— here, he could slip through the cracks.

And check on how those behemoth paintings Squid was recreating were doing, anyways, tall enough that ladders or potions were needed to get to the top. Beautiful recreations, artistic in their own right but an eyesore in others, a perfect view of them from the idling stream set up in a round that went through it all and—

The architecture was...sharp. Blocks that beget blocks, and all that, cleanly boned architecture floating in the breeze that made him reminisce of high-rises and smiles and floating plants. A smartly paved walkway outside of it, a manicured island until it dropped off to the void below— and he even had a railing along it all. Of course.

Not like he was surprised. The railing had been half complete the last time he had been there, a week prior. Now, with the sun shining down on his back before he walked into the cool interior of Squid's base, he let that smile widen when he saw the man himself hunched over a large table, stretching a canvas.

A man that, at the sound of the door, looked up with a horrified, knowing face.

"Not you again," he whined, voice as grating as it was endearing to be a sound he often heard. "What are you doing back? I finished that painting!"

"Gotta make sure you start the next one," he said, a wry smirk on now that couldn't be seen. He gave Squid a wide berth, trekking to the beginning point of the idling stream, the one that would take him on a round about Squid's art gallery, workplace, accolades...and the greenhouse he put his minions in, just easy enough to see in that Techno could run some calculations about the amount of potatoes they were producing with someone on the island when Squid wasn't.

The man in question sqwawked with outrage and raced after him to the coursing path of the water, face screwed up in consternation—

And he was gone, hands in pockets while he twitched his fingers and examined his plans to make a manual farm to accentuate the mechanical one he had spent so long optimizing. Another twitch, a finalization of what he'd use to divide up the land and add more, another, another—

[teach]: How's it going? Teaching that kid you're talking about a lesson?

He snorted softly. The water around his legs was cool as it pushed him. Refreshing.

[techno]: Well, at this rate it'll take me a few years to catch up now that everything's optimized.

[teach]: Gods.

[techno]: Unless I take it a step further.

Chapter End Notes

i'll put it here, because for all i care the next "chapter" doesn't exist except to provide some kind of not-particularly-satisfying conclusion.

i wish i could give thanks to techno for all he's done for me. i got some friends because of this fic, funnily enough. who'd've thunk. this also got me to be more confident in myself and my writing, as well as interacting with others. his content never failed to make me laugh, and i hope everyone reading always laughed at his jokes, too.

i don't think i'll make content that is based off of real people again, tangential or not. at least i had fun doing it. the feverish spell in which i wrote about 60-70k in 11-13 days in 2020 set the course of my life as i know it, and that's...just. huh.

all thanks to a dude that we all watched make banger content and help us bond. i hope he's doing okay wherever he is now.

i hope everyone has an okay day. year. whatever. you deserve it.

if you have any questions about something in this fic or the world or something, shoot.
i'll probably only pull an answer out of my ass half the time for ya.

the "bad bits"

Chapter Notes

the ending i found unsatisfying and far too short. i don't particularly care about or like dream and his content, but my hands wrote him into the fic long, long ago. make of this what you will, but you'd probably like making your own 'ending' in your mind far more.

there's meant to be a lot more between scenes here. i just chopped this off because i didn't like it. eh. but you get it anyways.

[techno]: I never used a regular interface, Dream. It's me. Thread magic and all.

[teach]: What the hell happened to you.

[techno]: An accident.

[techno]: Or, well. Yeah.

[teach]: You're saying an accident has meant I haven't heard from you for over half a year by now?

He tried something like a smile towards Phil and slid him his own glass of water, too far from actual reality to really think of a better solution for his plight. At Phil's strange look towards him, he waved his older brother off and tapped at his head. That only got a hum and a narrowing of the eyes.

[techno]: Yes.

[techno]: And I'd like to catch up with you.

[teach]: You don't just

[teach]: You don't get to waltz up like that when I thought you were MISSING or something

[teach]: You wouldn't just not return my messages I thought someone had taken your communicator away from you, what the hell happened. Was it that Squid person you were talking about? What. Happened.

[teach]: Don't weasel out of it.

[techno]: It's complicated.

[techno]: Let's catch up. See some of the buildings you've told me about, although I haven't scrolled up enough to see all five times they were mentioned.

[techno]: We have a lot of things to talk about. Including the fact that, if you'll have me, I would like to join wherever you are.

[teach]: Really.

[teach]: It's not

[teach]: I

[techno]: As I said, we need to talk in person about this.

Even if that was the last thing he wanted to do- meet a ghost from a past life and all. He didn't want to look at Dream and suddenly feel like everything in his past life had been how he had wanted it to be. He didn't want to suddenly be even more of a stranger to himself.

But...things were strange, both with Dream and with whatever situation his brothers had gotten into there, and there was just the simple fact that someone that had been so integral to his former life deserved to know about whatever had happened.

Even if Techno was rather sure they'd never quite be friends again, and was rather sure he didn't exactly want to be his friend simply based on everything he had gleaned about their relationship- teacher and student and then unsteady equals, only talking to each other about a select few of their fears, a select few of their pursuits.

And he wasn't going to do the disservice of trying to fumble the whole explanation through impersonal messages. You just didn't- you just didn't do that.

Ugh. Why did things have to be so complicated?

"Hey, Phil," he said out loud, only really half there.

A sniffling Phil, still trying to cough out the dregs of the water that wanted to settle in his lungs- "What, Techno?"

"Do you trust me to go out of the server on my own just to talk with Dream?"

"We haven't discussed it," Phil said, stopping to cough, voice rough and flat. "Alone. Not me there. I can't leave, still. Neither of your brothers there. Really."

"Really," he confirmed. "I was thinking...not my apartment." That was out of the question.
"...But I don't know where. Besides that. Nowhere that's private enough."

"...Hotel room, maybe?"

...Maybe if all else failed. "Anythin' else?"

"...Ask him? You're- a cough. "Talking with him right now, right?"

Techno grimaced. "I... I am."

"Why not here?"

Techno's mouth twisted into a sharp, sharp frown. He drummed his fingers on the table in front of him and breathed in, out, mind half focusing on a digital wavelength that spoke in data and told him of what Dream was trying to say, half focusing on Phil.

What to do, what to do, what to do.

"Has he been here before?"

"Not that I know of," Phil murmured. "They both met him somewhere else, first. I mean... there's pictures in here of us, in case you don't want him to know we're siblings." Us and Tommy and Wil, he clearly meant, the undertone perfect as crystal. In case you want to say we're not your brothers.

"I'm not going to lie on that," Techno replied, rolling his eyes- but he was also registering Dream's impatience at a lack of an answer, and he raised a hand to flick a finger and subvocalize his response.

[teach]: Where? Want to go to your apartment if we're both so sure it's you? I tried going there and I haven't been whitelisted since you went to farm those fucking potatoes and

[teach]: A cafe? An alleyway? WHERE, Techno?

[techno]: Just a moment, Dream. Teach. Figuring something out

[teach]: LIKE WHAT?

Impatient, impatient. Almost like a cat who pawed at its owner and screamed to be given something. He huffed.

"Here," he said thoughtfully. "And...and you-"

"I can whitelist him for the day." Phil took a long, slow sip of his water, and stared into his glass as if it were actually vodka instead. Techno resisted the urge to roll his eyes again and instead despaired silently over his older brother's damned dramatics. Wilbur had gotten it somewhere, and that somewhere was from Phil. "And I can go up the river, fish some. Or I can stay by the docks if you need me. I don't fuckin' care."

"So you do care," he interpreted, dry as dust, "and you'd like to stay."

"I'd like to keep an eye on the person you befriended without telling me and who Wil and Tommy hate," Phil agreed. He clasped his hands together and smiled at Techno. "I'm glad we have an understanding."

"He isn't my friend. He's-"

"What? An enemy? A former acquaintance? What is he?"

“A former friend,” Techno eventually said. He tried not to make a face at the labels they were both trying to give Teach. Dream. He failed. “He’s- something, that’s for sure.”

“That’s for damn sure.”

Techno gave into the urge to stare at the ceiling. “So he’s coming here,” he told the beams running along the cieling, the varnished and solid wood above the two of them. The grains ran particularly dark close to a knot near the middle, he noticed, and it really was so fascinating that-

Phil coughed pointedly.

“So he’s coming here,” Techno dutifully repeated, feeling Phil’s gaze even if he didn’t see it, “and we’ll- walk around, or something. Maybe go inside. We can figure it out. You’ll be close by.”

“Yes.”

“...Guess there’s no reason to put it off any longer,” Techno sighed. “Woe is me.”

“Woe is you, woe is me, woe is everyone indeed. Now tell him that he can come here. I just need his personal world signature so I can whitelist him.”

Who was he to disobey when such a decree was issued?

[techno]: I have a place. It’s a private server. Just need your personal world signature so you can come in

[teach]: And what if it’s a trap huh

[techno]: Just give it. Stop being

[techno]: like that

[teach]: Hah. Fuck. Whatever. Sure. Here.

This can only go well, he thought to the lovely wooden beam stretching across the cieling. It’s just you and me, beam. And Dream.

A cough. Again.

And Phil who’s sitting across from me at this table who doesn’t care for me thinking thoughts to a beam.

“Or actually speaking out loud to that ‘lovely wooden beam’, Techno.”

“I think I’ll go now,” he said faintly.

“...Yeah, mate. Get some sleep or some shit. Afternoon nap. Gods.”

A cloak that sung protection, that hummed home, that wrapped him in its care and promised to never let him get hurt. A shirt that murmured hidden, whispered safe and quiet- a fishing pole that had luck and strength and unbreaking along its length mixed with bigger fish and wonders forgotten and good tasting species to share the space.

He put the first two on. He gave the latter to Phil, who only looked amused at the fact that Techno was giving Phil's fishing pole- that had sat next to the door- to him right before they both exited the house.

"I'll be on the docks if you need me," Phil demurred, adjusting his hat and setting off into the melting atmosphere of the morning.

Blues turned to creams that settled down in a wash of warmth across the landscape. Birds trilled their melodies from the fence, from the trees. The grass was vibrant. Healthy. It was a soft cushion for his bare feet, springy but distinct enough to ground him to the here and now.

It felt, almost, like a liminal space. It was his home. It was the land that he had helped Phil with. This server license had been obtained through his own strength of will, even if not by utter fairness. It had been obtained through matters he didn't particularly care to think on.

But the house had been built by them. Or, rather, primarily by Phil but with Techno and Wilbur as passionate assistance. It was by them. For them. They had set the waypoint once they had found a space that Phil had fallen in love with. This was theirs, theirs, theirs-

And there was a particular taste of wrongness to that space when he watched the odd appearance of someone who was not meant to be there at all. A person the space had never been meant for.

But he gave a small smile from where he sat on the steps up to the porch, gaze half-dark and lips wryly quirked upwards.

A mask stared from down the path at him. At the cloak. At the shirt. There was no talk of 'is this too hot for you', nothing about him being a fake- but they sized each other up. Techno tilted his head, flicked an ear, and waited for the verdict.

From down the way, relatively tiny, Dream took one step. And then two.

And then he was running down towards Techno, a laugh peeling from his lips and a sound exuding utter joy being released into the air and Techno-

-let him barrel forwards into him as he stood up, only faintly reciprocating the hug that Dream was trying to suffocate him with.

Or, rather, not at all. He didn't reciprocate it at all.

He stared at Dream, who slowly let go, that mask on his face obscuring whatever Techno would have wanted to search for in an expression. He stared and stared and waited for Dream to say something. Anything.

"Hey, Teach," he eventually said into the vacuum, quiet and- distant.

Because this wasn't really a person he knew.

Well.

It was. But they were obviously both viewing each other from very different lenses. Techno tried to not fidget or let any expression show on his face. He watched and he stared and he remembered everything he had been told about the person Dream had become. Sorted through everything he had recalled over the expanse of time since he had been taken out of his subserver by Phil.

There was a sea of contradictions in how Techno viewed him. But at the same time- at the same time-

Dream had still been separated from him in their original relationship. Vastly different causes, it seemed, had caused relatively similar viewpoints. Skills were matched. Not everything else was.

And Dream was viewing him through the lens of that prior relationship. He could only see, now, the kind of almost-just-barely-confused exhaustion that Techno carried with him like a shroud, a memory never fully pieced together. He could only see the effects of the past few months- or, really, longer in Techno's mind- while not knowing the cause.

It found them on two very different sides of a divide, and Techno let his eyes do just a hint of smiling for him so he didn't have to do it all himself.

"Hey," Dream said in response. A slow sort of confusion laced his words. Joy. Perhaps a bit of anger, if Techno had to read into it. He didn't.

Instead, he beckoned for Dream to sit and lurched back down to the position he had been waiting for the man in.

"It's been a while, hasn't it," Techno murmured. There was an olive branch there, one he didn't entirely care to display, but it was worth it to at least throw the line out there. His- his- Dream took the line gratefully. Techno reeled him in. "You never really stopped messaging me."

"I- " His voice sounded a bit choked. Techno let him regain his composure. He continued to stare out at where the path led to the waypoint, rolled further to the sea, the dock to the side. They had all the time in the world, it almost felt, time stretching out to unthinkable lengths. "Yeah, I- I didn't. Why'd you stop responding?"

Isn't that the million credit question.

"As I said, it's complicated," Techno murmured, "and it's a story that even you won't get all of."

"Then why- I- why the hell am I here-"

"So." He spread his hands out, gesturing the beginning of something. Dream shut up. "So, I was farming potatoes, you see."

Silence.

“And the potato war I was in ended. As you know.”

“Yes.”

“And I continued to stay there. And work. And...and farm.” Techno didn’t want to go over it forever. There was a familiar feeling almost curdling in his chest that murmured about how he never wanted to speak of it. How he didn’t want to continue. He did so anyways. “And one day, I found that I had crushed my communicator. Because I still had the little hub that went in the pocket.”

“That went out of style at least a year ago in the middle of that stupid war, Te-“

“I still had the little hub that went in the pocket,” he repeated over Dream’s words. “And I didn’t know. That it had been crushed. Or, well. I did. And then I figured I’d fix it when I got back to where I started.”

He watched as, in the distance, Phil reeled something in. He hummed wordlessly while the line was cast back out again.

“And when I got to the start,” Techno almost murmured, voice quiet enough to almost get there but loud enough to still carry, “there was no exit to the overworld there. And I didn’t think that was weird.”

“...Techno-“

“Time was weird. But I...I got out. Eventually. I don’t owe you much more than that.”

“But what-“

“I came out to find that nothing was the same as I remembered.” A technicality, but true. “And my brother helped me. And then my brothers came to figure out what happened. My other brothers.”

Dream had learned to be silent. Good.

He stretched back and let his arms raise above his head. Techno waited until he felt a few bits cracking and sighed, seeping back to his original position, arms crossed over his knees, forearms resting right there. He let his shoulders hunch forward. He heard Dream shift next to him. Techno breathed.

“And eventually,” he murmured, “I figured out that the person my brothers liked to talk about was the same person who was my friend when I was in Hypixel.”

A short pause.

“And that they wanted me to help them fight a war against this friend. This. Dream. But they couldn’t make me.” A huff. “Because I didn’t want to. And because I was still recovering.”

If there was a moment of realization in there for Dream, Techno wasn't hearing it.

"Dream," he said flatly, "explain to me why you're running a server where there's some kind of inbetween system to regular servers and respawnable servers. And why you're killing people in it. Particularly, why you've killed Tommy, my brother. And letting...politics ensue. I thought you just liked to hang out with your friends, Dream. I don't get why in all the messages I scrolled past, nothing was stated plainly."

Techno cracked the bones in his hands and thought about the weapons in his room. About the permadeath nature of the private server they were both in at that very moment. Dream was silent.

"I'd like to join your server, you see, Dream," he said. "I'd like very much to join and sit back and make sure everyone plays nice."

"You- Tommy- Techno?"

Techno sat back and let it all process. Phil's fishing rod barely made any movements, although Phil's posture itself changed.

"You're Tommy's- you're Tommy and Wilbur's brother? The one they like to boast about?" Dream's voice was hoarse. "The brother they ditched the server for?"

"So going to help family isn't forgivable, it seems."

"No- I- that's not what I meant, Techno! You never even told me, I-"

"I asked you a question, earlier," he said thoughtfully. "Explain to me what kind of server you're running. And why anyone's died on it because of someone else. Riddle me that, Teach. Dream. Whoever you are, since that kind of a situation can't be run by anyone sane."

"Techno."

"Dream."

"You. I."

"Me," he parroted. "You."

"This isn't getting anywhere."

"No," Techno hummed. "It isn't."

He had all the time in the world. Or, well. At least it felt like that. Dream's time was ticking right on down the drain.

"They're my- friends," Dream said haltingly, like every word was a struggle to slowly get out.

"Try the other one."

"They're I- they were my friends," he gritted out, "until they just- that brat, I- he's just obsessing over these stupid discs, and then Wilbur came in and started chaos and I just wanted everyone to play nicely-"

"Tell me why you killed them, Dream," Techno breathed.

There was a ghost over his shoulders. The cloak was a remembrance of a thesis and a previous time's emotions. Situations. There was a heaviness to it that hadn't been there before. Techno tilted his head very slightly and tried to shake off the feeling.

It didn't work, of course, but he tried.

And when he opened his own mouth to add onto his words, he found himself unable to speak, anxiety seizing his throat, his body standing on the proverbial edge of a cliff, unable to even back away.

He didn't want this conversation to be happening. And yet.

After a time:

"I didn't mean to, Techno. I didn't. I didn't mean to."

"And yet you accepted a duel to the death."

"It wasn't a duel to the death, he's just exaggerating things, I swear-"

"Will everyone in your server say the same?"

Silence.

This wasn't the Dream he had known. Knew.

They had both changed irrevocably from the people they had once been when they had been friends, it seemed.

"I'm certified as an admin," Dream murmured. One of Techno's ears flicked- changing the subject, of course- but he let it slide. He had to. Information was information was information, as he had never said once in his life. Perhaps it was a remnant of a different time. "A...one with respawning certifications."

"And not working with Hypixel. Or Mineplex. Or any of the others." Unsaid: Instead, running a presumably unlicensed private server.

"...No."

Techno could practically taste the edge he had over Dream.

"Dream."

"Techno."

“Let me in there,” he said to the air, making the motions of cracking the bones in his hands yet again. “We can...chat. About other things.” A pause. “I don’t think I can be your- friend anymore, you know.”

A deep breath. “...They...Tommy and Wilbur are your brothers, huh?”

“Yes.” He finally glanced over at the presence beside him. He saw a mask and a hood and lime all the way down the hoodie. Dark pants. As tacky as always. “And I can’t trust you in the same server as them anymore, you see.”

They sat there for what felt like an hour. Maybe a minute. Maybe two. His sense of time, Techno thought, had been rather shot ever since somewhere in the middle of the whole potato fiasco. One moment he’d feel like a shade of the person he had been at the end of the Potato War, a grin on and an arm around someone else’s shoulders- and the next he’d feel...dazed. Ancient.

The latter almost never happened, but he could scent that mood on the breeze. Techno brushed up against what memories he had collected of his years in Hypixel, matched them to the person next to him as he stared back out at the shore, and sighed.

Phil cast out one line. And another. Waited. Another. Catch after catch.

It was when the eighth line was being cast that Dream sighed, long and heavy, just like how Techno felt. Same, he thought- and then quashed down a faint fondness that didn’t entirely feel like him.

“You’ll ruin what I’ve worked on,” Dream murmured. It took Techno a moment to connect it all up before he snorted.

“I don’t want to be involved in any politics,” he sniffed, leaning back and crossing his arms. If he wasn’t mistaken, Dream twitched in- confusion. Something like bafflement. “I’m just not letting you pull any more shit. You hear me?”

“...I hear you.”

“Good,” he said resolutely. “So you’re whitelisting me.”

“I- what? Not yet!”

“Why not?”

He didn’t smile as Dream spluttered. Techno let it peter out before he spoke again.

“I’m going there,” he said quietly, voice clear as day, “and you’re not going to stop me. After all, I know you’re not operating that server properly. And you’re breaking other laws doing it. I’m sure others in there know that, too.”

Maybe Schlatt does.

His lip curled around his tusks, but he said nothing about him.

"I expect," he said mildly, "for it to be done. By tomorrow."

One fishing line cast. Caught. Another.

"I see that I don't have a choice," the other man murmured. Techno smiled with all his teeth at nothing in particular.

"No," he agreed. "You don't. And it's high time you leave for the day to get things ready. And to make it so that my brothers can go where they wish. And to start stopping the utterly petty conflicts that make me think all of you in there are children."

Techno watched, mild as milk, as Dream wordlessly stood up and walked a few steps forward. Gave a gimlet stare as the man looked back at him for one beat, two, three- and turned to walk off back to the waypoint.

I have a lot to fix, don't I, he thought. He put a hand on his chin, propped up that elbow on a knee, and watched as Dream left in a rather undignified shower of light.

The line was reeled in. It didn't get cast out again.

"Fish for dinner?" When Phil walked back up and passed him, pausing on the steps, Techno gave a low, thoughtful hum. No words were exchanged about the meeting. There was always time for later.

"Fish for dinner," he murmured, and leaned forwards to stare intensely at the space that Dream had left in. "Maybe I'll bring some of the leftovers to Wil and Tommy tomorrow."

"I'll tell you when it's ready."

Techno only hummed.

The door opened and closed with a quiet click. Techno closed his eyes.

Breathe in. Out. In.

He silently fell apart and pieced himself back together before he went in to make himself lunch, hands only shaking just a little bit.

Techno rather thought he didn't like this new Dream, this new Teach that had appeared on his doorstep and left like the kind of ghost he had only faintly imagined him as. It was just his luck that everything, even the good bits of Hypixel, never seemed to truly last when standing the test of time.

Maybe it'd get better in time.

Probably not, his subconscious murmured, and he drifted to his room to start packing what he'd bring to the other server.

His cloak chanted protection and his clothes sang safe, and he felt more stifled than he had ever been in his life.

Techno continued to pack.

“You’re coming back.”

“Yes,” he agreed, adjusting the strap of the second bag he had with him. Two bags to sum up all of his life that he wanted to take there. What truly mattered stayed with Phil, with the home that he could always go back to, the home he had bought with blood, sweat, and tears for his family. “Three days and then I’ll be back for two. And then we’ll see what happens.”

“And you’ll text.”

“Mm.” A nod.

Phil looked at him as if there were secrets still locked up inside of Techno that still had to be told for peace of mind. Techno thought there wasn’t, but, well, what did he know? But some things were still meant to be private, kept behind lock and key.

So he probably was right.

But he was leaving now, so.

“I’ll miss you,” he eventually said to Phil, words bursting out of him even though they were quiet, even though they were still tentative. Techno grimaced and turned away.

Phil started to laugh.

“I’ll- I- I’ll miss you too,” Phil chuckled, “but- I know you’ll miss me, okay? Just like how I’ll miss Wilbur and Tommy, too. Bring them back for a day, too, okay? They’re too- obsessed over getting back at whoever slighted them. Dream. Whatever the fuck.”

“...I’ll be going, then.” For lack of a better thing to say, Techno made a face through it and hoped Phil couldn’t hear the slow awkwardness in his tone. “...To. That server.”

Silence. He opened the door.

“I’ll see you soon,” Phil hummed, and Techno shut the door behind him. Staggered down one step. Two. Adjusted the bags he was carrying off of one shoulder and looked up at the sky when he shifted his cloak.

I sure hope it’s at least somewhat cold, there, he thought mildly, turned to give a glance at the garden they had set up- potatoes ready for harvest, others still growing, others needing to be planted- and resolved that they could wait.

He’d be coming back, after all. For Phil. For the potatoes. For his own sanity.

So they could wait on him to do so.

He walked up to the waypoint-

-and let himself be strung away and onto Dream's own tapestry.

"Welcome," Dream said quietly as he touched down at the world's own waypoint, smack dab in the center of a cobbled structure of brick and wood and makeshift care around him, "to—"

[Welcome, [TECHNO], to Dream SMP.]

There was only one way to go from there, he figured.

Forwards.

End Notes

have a wonderful day, wherever you're seeing this, and stay safe out there. find comfort in the little things.

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